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Rousseau's Ethics of Truth

A Sublime Science of Simple Souls

Jason Neidleman



Rousseau's Ethics of Truth

In 1758, Rousseau announced that he had adopted “*vitam impendere vero*” (dedicate life to truth) as a personal pledge. Despite the dramatic nature of this declaration, no scholar has yet approached Rousseau’s work through the lens of truth or truthseeking. What did it mean for Rousseau to lead a life dedicated to truth? This book presents Rousseau’s normative account of truthseeking, his account of what human beings must do if they hope to discover the truths essential to human happiness. Rousseau’s writings constitute a practical guide to these truths; they describe how he arrived at them and how others might as well. In reading Rousseau through the lens of truth, Neidleman traverses the entirety of Rousseau’s *corpus* and, in the process, reveals a series of symmetries among the disparate themes treated in those texts. The first section of the book lays out Rousseau’s general philosophy of truth and truthseeking. The second section follows Rousseau down four distinct pathways to truth: reverie, republicanism, religion, and reason. With a strong grounding in both the Anglophone and Francophone scholarship on Rousseau, this book will appeal to scholars across a broad range of disciplines.

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This book is dedicated to Nicole Nourmand,
whose outward countenance has always been the
image of her heart's dispositions.

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A Note on Citations

References to Rousseau are, first, to *Œuvres complètes* Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959–1996 (hereafter OC) and, second, to *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1990–2009 (hereafter CW). Rousseau's correspondence is cited from *Correspondence Complète de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. R.A. Leigh, 51 vols., Geneva: Institut and Musée Voltaire, 1965–1995 (hereafter CC). I have used the following abbreviations: C = *Confessions*; Cor = *Constitutional Project for Corsica*; D = *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*; DAS = *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, also referred to as the first Discourse; DI = *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, also referred to as the second Discourse; DM = *Discourse on Music*; E = *Emile*; FR = *Final Reply*; GM = *Geneva Manuscript*; L = *Essay on the Origin of Languages*; LB = *Letter to Beaumont*; LF = *Letter to Franquières*; LM = *Letters Written from the Mountain*; LMal = *Letter to Malesherbes*; LV = *Letter to Voltaire*; ML = *Moral Letters*; NH = *Julie or the New Heloise*; O = *Observations [to Stanislas, king of Poland]*; PE = *Discourse on Political Economy*; PN = *Preface to Narcissus*; R = *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*; SC = *Social Contract*; SP = *On the Writings of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre*.

Preface

This book was inspired by an arresting phrase—*communion des coeurs* (communion of hearts)—that appears in Marcel Raymond’s commentary on Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.¹ A “communion of hearts” was the aim, Raymond wrote, of Rousseau’s solitary reveries. Although it had long been clear to me that a communion of hearts—*fraternité* in the French political tradition—was at the core of Rousseau’s writings on politics and society, it initially struck me as strange to see Rousseau’s expressly unsocial nature walks described in this way. After all, Rousseau’s aim in the *Reveries* would seem to be antithetical to a *communion des coeurs*. His stated purpose there was to attain an entirely self-regarding, self-sufficient state of consciousness—one that ceased to be dependent in any way on recognition from others. How could a paean to solitude double as a meditation on communion? As I reflected on the *Reveries*, it became clear that Rousseau sought in reverie something analogous to the fellowship of citizens he so famously celebrated in political writings like the *Discourses*, *On the Social Contract*, and *The Government of Poland*.

This realization started me thinking about the ways communion and the desire for it animated Rousseau’s various attempts to theorize wholeness and reconciliation. Over the course of his literary career, Rousseau pursued a variety of such pathways, in an attempt to understand and possibly recuperate the original goodness that he believed humanity had once enjoyed but could no longer comprehend. He correspondingly produced writings in a variety of registers, recommending a variety of (potentially contradictory) solutions to the problems that plague modern society. The prospect of a grand unifying theory of Rousseau’s philosophical system, one capable of reconciling Rousseau’s ambivalence about solitude and society, religious liberty and civil religion, particular and general will, reason and sentiment, has long been discounted as illusory. The pursuit of such a theory has been dismissed as futile or even imperious, insofar as it implicates the critic in the imposition of a unifying structure on texts which are themselves not susceptible to one.

It is my contention, however, that the texts are in fact susceptible to such an interpretation—that, in reading Rousseau through the lens of

communion and his preferred pathways to communion, a coherent and consistent philosophy of truthseeking emerges. There is a symmetry that unites the communion Rousseau experienced in solitary reverie, with the religious communion he enjoyed among his “brothers” in Neuchâtel, and the political communion he extolled in his writings on politics. (*Political Fragment*, OC iii:178; iv:54) There is an impulse represented in each of these experiences to become part of something larger than oneself, to “extend our being,” as Rousseau puts it in *Emile*. (iv:430; xiii:312) This impulse toward communion is manifested across the spectrum of Rousseau’s writings, whether as the savage’s love of existence, the citizen’s love of the *patria*, the solitary’s love of nature, the philosopher’s love of the “whole human race,” (GM, iii:178; iv:54), or the Christian’s love of her “brothers.”

Neither religious faith, nor civic virtue, nor nature walks, nor public festivals were ends in themselves for Rousseau. Each was rather judged by him on the basis of its capacity to move human beings closer to the *communion* that the savage and solitary experience as communion with nature, the citizen, Julie, and Emile experience as a *communion des coeurs*, and that the religious believer experiences as communion with God and with his or her fellow believers. Each could be hijacked, usually under the influence of *amour propre*, such that it undermined communion and fostered instead division and inequality. But each could be redemptive as well, when pursued within the constraints of Rousseau’s philosophy of truthseeking.

This book is about the pathways back to the elemental and sublime truth of communion. It is a reading of what I will call Rousseau’s “ethics of truth,” which is really an ethics of truthseeking—an account of how modern human beings might overcome the alienation that predominates in modern society and grasp once again, what Rousseau referred to as “the truths that pertain to human happiness.” (DAS, iii:3; ii:3)² This ethics of truthseeking, I will attempt to show, animates Rousseau’s various images of unity. In the chapters that make up this book, I first describe the nature of the truths sought by the solitary, the citizen, the religious believer, and the intuitive reasoner and then the contours of the various pathways to truth traced in Rousseau’s writings. In so doing, I put to one side the metaphysical question of truth’s final status and work under the supposition that there is much to be discovered *via* a sincere investigation of Rousseau’s pledge to consecrate himself to truth.³

I am more interested (in this book) in exegesis than evaluation. While I address some common critiques of Rousseau, it is not my purpose either to defend Rousseau against the various criticisms leveled against him or to rescue him from the various agendas in the service of which he has been deployed. My aim is rather to influence those appropriations and criticisms by reflecting on the structure of Rousseau’s argument from a perspective that maximizes its intellectual force. This is necessarily an interpretation “from within”—which begins from Rousseau’s first principles and then

demonstrates how Rousseau uses those principles to mount a critique of modernity, for which he then proposes a series of solutions. It is an exegesis of Rousseau's argument that I undertake in this book rather than an assessment of the viability of his first principles, the accuracy of his critique of modernity, the adequacy of his proposed solutions, or the various ways psychological or socio-political agendas may infiltrate Rousseau's texts. Those questions will have to wait for another occasion—hopefully an occasion over which the argument of this book will have exerted some influence.

Notes

- 1 Marcel Raymond, *La quête de soi et la rêverie* (Paris: Librairie Jose Corti, 1962) 147.
- 2 At the outset of his literary career, Rousseau committed himself to the pursuit of these truths. These basic, elemental truths were, for Rousseau, the only justification for philosophical inquiry or a literary career.
- 3 In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau adopted as his personal motto *vitam impendere vero* (dedicate life to truth), taken from Juvenal's *Satires*. (v:120; x:348)

Acknowledgments

The idea for this book was born at a colloquium on Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, hosted by the Rousseau Association and coordinated by John O'Neal at Hamilton College in 2005. Because my background is in political theory and my previous work on Rousseau had focused on the general will, I was more familiar with Rousseau's explicitly political writings than I was with his autobiographical work. The more I reflected on the *Reveries*, however, the more it struck me that Rousseau's solitary reveries shared important and fundamental affinities with his republic of virtue. As I continued to reflect on these affinities, it became clear to me that something similar could be said of all of Rousseau's models of harmony and reconciliation.

Over the last decade, I have pursued this intuition in developing what I refer to as an ethics of truth, or, more precisely, an ethics of truthseeking, which animates—and helps to reconcile—Rousseau's famously disparate models of harmony and reconciliation. In so doing, I have benefitted in countless ways from the existing, voluminous scholarship on Rousseau. On truthseeking, I am indebted to Henri Gouhier, Robert Derathé, and Pierre Burgelin; on sincerity, to Alessandro Ferrara, Judith Shklar, and Arthur Melzer; on communion, to Laurence Cooper, Jean Starobinski, and Julia Simon; on reverie, to Marcel Raymond and Gaston Bachelard; on republicanism, to Bonnie Honig, Joshua Cohen, Anna Stilz, Stanley Hoffmann, Shklar, Melzer, and, especially, Bronislaw Baczko. On hermeneutics, I am indebted to Elizabeth Rose Wingrove; on religion, to P.M. Masson, Yves Touchefeu, Victor Gourevitch, Gouhier, Derathé, Ronald Beiner, Helena Rosenblatt, Charles Griswold, and Patrick Riley; and on reason, I have benefitted especially from Starobinski, Ernst Cassirer, and Timothy O'Hagan.

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Revelations: The Ontological and Epistemological Dimensions of Rousseau's Turn to Reverie," *International Journal of the Humanities* 6.3 (2008) pp. 53–62; and "Rousseau's Rediscovered Communion des Coeurs: Cosmopolitanism in the Reveries of the Solitary Walker," *Political Studies* 60, no. 1 (2012): 76–94. Part of chapter six appeared as "'Par le bon usage de ma liberté': freedom and Rousseau's reconstituted Christianity," in Christie McDonald and Stanley Hoffmann, eds. *Rousseau and Freedom* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 142–158. I thank the New York Public Library for the image of Rousseau that appears at the beginning of this volume.

I have been sustained through my writing and research by an academic institution that nurtured my scholarship, a community of scholars from whom I derived inspiration and received support, a circle of family and friends who give me the strength and will to write, and many, many students, for whom and with whom I have done my best to do justice to the seminal questions raised in Rousseau's philosophical system.

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December 1, 2015



Figure 0.1 Vitam Impendere Vero (dedicate life to truth)

Image Courtesy of the New York Public Library, Digital Collections

Introduction

“I wrote always the same . . .
maxims, same principles”

(LB, iv:928; ix:22)

For a variety of reasons, Rousseau’s writings are often regarded as inconsistent, paradoxical, and/or irreconcilable. In essays, novels, treatises, biographies, letters, and polemics on music, language, education, politics, morality, theatre, and human nature, Rousseau alternately praised the citizen, the savage, and the solitary. He both defended and attacked Christianity and cosmopolitanism. He was stalwart in defense of individual conscience and yet insisted on the importance a “civil religion.” Rousseau called himself a “man of paradoxes” in *Emile* and entreated his readers to “pardon [his] paradoxes.” (iv:323; xiii:226) Nevertheless, Rousseau also claimed that there was a unity to his work. In the *Letter to Beaumont*, for example, Rousseau claimed to have written “always with the same principles: always the same morality, the same belief, the same maxims, and if you will the same opinions.” (iv:928; ix:22)

This book revives a much-maligned tradition of Rousseau scholarship, which takes seriously Rousseau’s claim to have presented a coherent system. There is a philosophy of truth, or, more accurately, a philosophy of truth-seeking, I argue, that animates Rousseau’s broader philosophical system. In order to make this case, it is necessary to take seriously Rousseau’s claim to have presented a coherent system and, therefore, to conduct the kind of intertextual reading that has become controversial among Rousseau scholars.¹

Rousseau never systematically listed the “maxims” or “principles” that he believed unified his diverse writings, and many readers have found Rousseau’s claim to consistency implausible. Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, for example, has asked pointedly, “At some point it is fair to ask, why labor to maintain distinctions that the text consistently fails to keep clear?”² Wingrove rightly notes that the impulse to resolve obvious tensions in Rousseau’s works often says more about the agenda of the interpreter than it does about Rousseau’s texts themselves. It makes more sense, Wingrove

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implies, to identify and explore tensions in Rousseau's texts—their effect on his argument and what they may tell us about how political tensions manifest in political life—than it does to traverse one's way to a baroque account of unity. Rather than asking whether a particular interpretation “gets Rousseau right,” Wingrove prefers to investigate how “different terms of ‘rightness’ foreclose on some possibilities and enable others.”³ While Wingrove does not entirely dismiss attempts to “get Rousseau right,” her suggestion is clear. Those who would take seriously Rousseau's claim to have produced a system—who would seek out symmetries across Rousseau's diverse writings—must have recourse to a hypothetical “higher ground,” from which they assert unearned authority.

Wingrove's critique is one to which I would plead guilty, but guilty, as Woody Allen once said, with an explanation. Readings like the one presented here, which seek to apply a structure to disparate writings, *ought* to be read as much for what they say about the agenda of their authors as they are for what they say about the agenda of their subjects. Still, I maintain that it is nevertheless worthwhile to investigate the possibility of a philosophical system of the kind Rousseau asserted but did not methodically spell out. Rousseau never explicitly wove together his diverse images of reconciliation, but he did indicate on several occasions the belief that there was an underlying consistency to these images. My attempt to explore this suggestion will, of course, be as much a reflection of my own sensibilities as it will be of Rousseau's. This point does not vitiate the interpretive approach; it only makes clear its limitations and, ideally, serves to mitigate what might otherwise be a tendency to overdraw generalizations or exaggerate narrative possibilities. It is perhaps also worth pointing out in regard to this issue that *all* interpretations are as much a reflection of their authors as they are a reflection of their subjects. Whether one reads for thematic coherence or to explore tensions and lacunae, interpreters must always make contestable decisions about what to emphasize, how to contextualize, and how to construe ambiguities. Neither those who discover continuities nor those who find contradictions come to Rousseau's texts from a privileged position of epistemological neutrality.

Admittedly, to read Rousseau for thematic coherence is to read him unconventionally. Rousseau's writings have come to be associated with paradox and contradiction, a dimension that Rousseau himself acknowledged and even occasionally burnished as a point of pride. I will not go so far as to claim that my reading resolves the well-known paradoxes in Rousseau's writings. My aim is less audacious, though still, admittedly, quite audacious. Rather than claim to resolve or deny Rousseau's paradoxes, I attempt instead to alter the terrain upon which they are negotiated—to show how it is that Rousseau could have proudly owned his paradoxes without feeling that he had compromised the integrity of what he called his “system.” When Rousseau's writings are approached through the lens of what I refer to as “communion,” a number of the difficulties associated with Rousseau

studies are mitigated, and symmetries begin to emerge among Rousseau's many models of recovery and reconciliation.

It is the argument of this book that there is a philosophy of truth animating Rousseau's diverse writings, and this philosophy provides coherence to what may otherwise appear to be incompatible models of reconciliation. This philosophy can be summarized as utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity in pursuit of communion.

I. Rousseau and the Problem of Truth

Contemporary academic philosophers have focused on developing a formal theory of truth—a theory that explains what it is for a statement to be true or what is meant by the term “truth.” This work lays out criteria under which statements either ought to be described as true or are described as true, depending on the theoretical orientation of the philosopher.⁴ These formal approaches to truth would likely fall under the category of what Rousseau called “metaphysical quibbles and subtleties which have no weight,” (*R*, i:1018; viii:23) because they offer little or no guidance to those interested in grasping the “truths that pertain to human happiness.”

For contemporary philosophers, this latter, Rousseauean question—What are the truths that pertain to human happiness?—is not treated under the rubric of the philosophy of truth. Why this has occurred is a question worthy of its own historical investigation. Suffice it to say that one result of dovetailing trends in the history of ideas has been that the question of the truths of human happiness is not generally regarded as susceptible to philosophical analysis. Instead, writing on the pursuit of the truths essential to human happiness has proliferated in sections of bookstores with titles like “self-help,” “theology,” “spirituality,” and now, perhaps, “psychology” and “neuroscience.” Whereas ancient Athenians turned to Socrates for insight into the truths essential for human happiness, we now prefer theologians, self-help experts, life coaches, psychologists, and spiritual advisors. Socrates’s philosophy of truth included both a formal analytics of truth and an ethics of truthseeking. Today those two subjects have been disjoined, with the former migrating almost entirely into the realm of academic philosophy and the latter moving almost entirely out of it. While the formal analytics of truth thrives in contemporary philosophy, Socrates’s ethical inquiry into truthseeking has been left to non-philosophers.

Following Rousseau, this book offers a guide for those engaged in the pursuit of truth. It does not attempt to provide a formal definition of truth, often characterized in contemporary philosophy as an account of “what it means for a statement to be true.” This latter question is the foundation for most of what currently occurs in the philosophical study of truth, and the scholarship addressing this question is formal, rather than substantive or ethical. It yields neither a catalog of substantively true claims nor an ethical account of what human beings must do to access that catalog of truths.

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Rather, it describes what human beings are doing when they make truth claims, or what is meant by the terms “truth” and “falsehood.” This was not Rousseau’s question; he was not concerned to explain what truth is in an abstract or formal sense.⁵

The critique of academic philosophy as excessively formal, abstract, or esoteric can itself be traced back to Rousseau. Rousseau was concerned that the philosophy of his contemporaries was overly detached, and, as a consequence, could not offer guidance to those concerned to discover the truths essential to human happiness.

I have seen many who philosophized much more learnedly than I, but their philosophy was, so to speak, foreign to them. Wanting to be more knowledgeable than others, they studied the universe in order to know how it was ordered, just as they would have studied some machine they might have perceived through pure curiosity. They studied human nature to be able to speak knowingly about it, but not in order to know themselves; they toiled in order to instruct others, but not in order to enlighten themselves within. . . . As for me, when I desired to learn, it was in order to know and not in order to teach. I have always believed that before instructing others, it was necessary to begin by knowing enough for oneself; and of all the studies I have tried to undertake during my life in the midst of men, there is hardly any I could not just as well have undertaken alone on a desert island to which I might have been confined for the rest of my days. (*R*, i:1012–1013; viii:18)

This book presents a normative account of truthseeking, of what human beings ought to do—what they must do—if they are to (re)discover the immediate truths of human happiness, the metaphysical essence of which Rousseau was little inclined to investigate. His writings constitute a practical guide to the pathways that lead back to these truths; they are an account of how Rousseau arrived at them and how we might as well. For Rousseau, the paths to truth were many, but their contours were similar. He believed that the truths essential to human happiness *could* be known, that they *were* known, in fact, by human beings in their natural state, and that they are obscure now only because they have *been* obscured by civilization, leaving most of us unhappy and morally corrupted. Nevertheless, several avenues will lead back to truth, for those willing to consecrate themselves to it.

Every human being wonders about the truths essential to human happiness at some point in her life—whether in religious worship, at a wedding or funeral, in the midst of a personal crisis, or, perhaps, while reading literature or philosophy. Even in societies dominated by ambition, consumption, and entertainment, it is difficult to imagine a human life lived without any concern for truth. We will all wonder at some point what we can know, how we can know it, how sure we can be, and, perhaps most importantly, what we need to know in order to be happy. Truth is something everyone desires, even

liars and those who claim not to seek it.⁶ Many will look for answers that allow them to stop thinking about these difficult, often troubling questions. They will attach themselves to a doctrine or ideology, perhaps a social network or set of mores that allows them to settle on an answer to these questions, to calm their restless minds. Some, however, will continue to pursue the question of truth—its nature, its susceptibility to human understanding, its substantive context, the possibility of its universality. Rousseau’s writings on truth offer a guide to those inclined to wonder about these questions from one who never stopped wondering about them. Taken as a whole, they describe various pathways back to the simple “truths that pertain to human happiness”—the only truths Rousseau thought it was important to know.

This book is the first on Rousseau to approach him through the lens of truth—that to which he claimed to have dedicated his life.⁷ In one sense, the relative inattention paid to Rousseau as a philosopher of truth is not surprising. It may even be the case, depending on how one understands the phrase, that we cannot sensibly speak of Rousseau as having developed a “philosophy of truth.” For his part, Rousseau was quick to repel any suggestion that what he was doing could be called philosophy.

You are quite correct, my dear sir, to say that I am not a philosopher. . . . But, when you accuse me of not being a philosopher, it is as though you were accusing me of not being a master of dance. . . . I never aspired to become a philosopher; I was never given to such things; I was not one, nor am I one, nor do I want to be one. (CC, to Charles-Hubert Méreau, 1 March 1763, 2519, xv:249)⁸

“Philosophy” was a pejorative for Rousseau, “metaphysics” even more so, and yet, as Henri Gouhier’s work demonstrates, Rousseau developed his own metaphysics in spite of his purported contempt for it. Rousseau used “philosophy” and “metaphysics” as shorthands for those aspects of philosophical inquiry he criticized, but Rousseau *was* interested in the nature of truth, its susceptibility to human understanding, and the avenues by which it could be most effectively accessed. The aspects of philosophy that Rousseau disdained prevented him from considering himself a philosopher, but this should not keep us from recognizing those aspects of his work that make important contributions to philosophy. Rousseau’s philosophy of truth warrants careful study, both in and of itself and for what it tells us about his larger system of thought.

II. Truth as an Ethical Problem

Before moving on to an account of what Rousseau’s philosophy of truth was, it is worth spending a little more time on what it was not. Theories of truth are usually associated with epistemology or metaphysics. Rousseau, however, approached the question of truth from an ethical perspective, just as he did religion and politics. Philosophy, Rousseau maintained, must be

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made to serve the ethical imperative of human happiness. It must never be permitted to set its own standards or pose its own questions. The practical requirements of human happiness should direct the questions posed in philosophical inquiry and should guide the investigation of those questions. Metaphysical inquiry can be justified when undertaken in the context of the ethical imperative to produce truths that serve human happiness. But metaphysics, as a stand-alone discipline, came to be Rousseau's pejorative term for any purely theoretical inquiry.

Rousseau was not interested in all questions of truth; he was interested in identifying only the "truths that pertain to human happiness" and in describing how those truths could be accessed. He was not interested in what he regarded as purely academic questions—what makes a statement true or whether there is truth at all—but in an ethics of truth. He was interested in *truthseeking*. Rousseau presupposed the availability of truth—at least the availability of those truths necessary to his happiness and did so, it seems, for the utilitarian reason that life would otherwise be simply unbearable. He then vowed to dedicate his life to recapturing those basic truths (*vitam impendere vero*).

It may seem strange to seek the truth—to consecrate one's life to it, in fact—without first knowing what it is. I will address this in more detail later (Part I, chapter 3), but it is sufficient to say for now that, for Rousseau, the question of what truth is, while of great interest, did not constitute a philosophical problem. He believed that the truths necessary to human happiness were largely known to us *via* an innate sentiment, that philosophy had done much to obscure those truths, and that the urgent question was not, What is truth?, but rather, How might truth be reclaimed? He was after a philosophy that would be useful to him and, by extension, to all human beings, not a formal account of what a person does when she advances a truth claim.

Neither was Rousseau bothered by a question that has become the subject of much scholarly interest since having been posed by Friedrich Nietzsche—the question of the value of truth itself. Rousseau never questioned the value of truth or the urgency of truthseeking, though he did distinguish between truths that are useful and those that are not. He never considered truth as a function of power, though he did regard most philosophy as a product of selfish social or psychological agendas. Rousseau's approach to the question of truth presupposed a simple set of truths that he believed to be essential to human happiness—the goodness of existence, the natural freedom and equality of every individual, the supremacy of justice, and the ecstasy of communion, whether with nature, God, or one's fellow human beings. From there, he asked not what makes these principles true but rather how they might be grasped. Rousseau believed that the most important question was not what truth is or what the value of truth is, but rather how truth can be accessed. Rousseau knew what truth was and observed that modern men and women had somehow lost sight of it, however obvious it ought to be. So his question was a social and ethical one: how to reclaim the immediate truths of human happiness that have been obscured by society.

Juvenal's imperative to dedicate life to truth was, for Rousseau, as much about happiness as it was about truth. A detached interest in truth could be instrumentally useful from time to time, as dictated by the demands of justice and happiness. But truthseeking must never be divorced from the ethical imperatives of justice or happiness, lest it fall into the empty, soulless logic-chopping that Rousseau so often castigated. Rousseau was interested only in truths necessary to human happiness. It could be said that, for Rousseau, happiness trumps truth, or, more accurately, happiness is part of the criteria for truth claims. He rejected the possibility that an individual could hold a belief that is both false and supportive of her happiness. A belief, in order for it to be true, must also serve happiness. Those that do not are merely “metaphysical quibbles and subtleties,” which is how Rousseau would likely characterize the problems of interest to contemporary philosophers of truth. It is for this reason that I refer to Rousseau’s philosophy of truth as an ethics of truth, more in the tradition of Socrates’s model of truthseeking than in the tradition of Frege’s or Russell’s analytical philosophy. The value of philosophy lay for Rousseau in what Kierkegaard would later call “existence” more than in “abstraction.” Kierkegaard explains the distinction in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

One thinks that existing is nothing, even less an art, after all we all exist, but to think abstractly, that is something. However, truly to exist, that is to permeate one’s existence with consciousness, at once eternal as though far beyond it and yet present in it, and nevertheless in the course of becoming—that is truly difficult.⁹

Any truth-telling philosopher, Kierkegaard argued, will philosophize out of a desire “to understand himself in the existence of faith,” and every reader of philosophy should demand a “stamp of ethical approval . . . of anything calling itself wisdom.”¹⁰ Kierkegaard, like Rousseau, associated this approach to philosophy with Socrates and juxtaposed it to abstraction, which he associated primarily with Hegel. The problem of truth here becomes an ontological or existential question, a question of how one engages the world, of how one relates to one’s own existence.

Rousseau’s truthseeker works on herself. His was an ethics of the self that looked back to Socrates (and Plutarch) and pointed forward to Kierkegaard, more than laterally to Enlightenment rationalism.¹¹ Rousseau studied truth as a function of what Michel Foucault has called a “relation to the self,” drawing on the Greek idea of *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self).¹² Foucault said of his late work on truth and the ethics of the self that he was interested not in the “problem of truth” but in “the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity.”¹³ He distinguished between the problem “determining whether a statement is true” and the question of “truth-telling.”¹⁴ The former he associated with an “analytics of truth,” the latter with the “critical” tradition.

Like Foucault, Rousseau approached truth in the context of a relation to oneself. Unlike Foucault, however, Rousseau divorced truth from power, aspiring to a transparent relationship to oneself in which the distorting effects of power could be removed and the truth could be seen unobstructed. Rousseau's truthseeker must work on herself, as Foucault emphasizes, but, done properly, Rousseau took for granted that she could access the truths she needs to be happy. The assumption underlying Rousseau's philosophy of truthseeking is that truth itself is not a function of power, as Foucault would later argue, but that it is rather a gift of the Creator who makes it accessible to those in a position to recognize it.

Truth itself is there for the taking for those able to put themselves in a position to know it. As in the ancient tradition, it was, for Rousseau, character more than evidence that determined the truthseeker's access to truth. As Foucault put it in his study of Greek philosophy, there is "no access to truth without ascesis."¹⁵ This approach to truth is usefully distinguished from an alternate tradition, in which the formal apparatus of philosophical inquiry takes precedence over the character of the truthseeker. For Descartes and his disciples, evidence is substituted for ascesis, becoming the new standard bearer of veridical discourse. Whereas for the ancients it was not possible for an immoral person to know the truth, the Cartesian transformation severed the question of truth from moral considerations. "The extraordinary thing in Descartes' texts," Foucault writes, "is that he succeeded in substituting a subject as founder of practices of knowledge, for a subject constituted for practices of the self."¹⁶ In order to know the truth, the Rousseauean subject (like the Greek one), must engage in a "certain work which would make him susceptible to knowing the truth."¹⁷ Rousseau does not distinguish strictly between the theoretical and the practical. Rousseau's work might be characterized as an ontology of morals—in contrast to Kant's rationalist metaphysics of morals—through which he describes a series of lived pathways to a recuperation of the truths essential to human happiness.

It has often been said that Rousseau was a "moralist," as Charles Hendl called him, or "a political writer," as Victor Gourevitch has written, by which it is meant not that Rousseau constrained himself exclusively to explicitly political or moral questions but rather that he approached most questions—political, moral, and otherwise—from a political or ethical perspective.¹⁸ In the *Confessions*, Rousseau describes coming to the realization that "everything depends radically on politics." (i:404; v:340) Rousseau's criterion for truth claims was correspondingly pragmatic, grounded in his sense of the requirements of human happiness, both personal and political. Insofar as he yoked truth to ethics, Rousseau stood opposed to the rationalism prevalent among his contemporaries. Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* was an attempt to make the requirements of politics and ethics once again the criterion for truth claims. The urgency of this imperative became clear to Rousseau, he reports, in a moment of illumination he experienced on the road to Vincennes. It was upon seeing a question posed by

the Academy of Dijon—Has the restoration of the sciences and arts tended to purify morals?—that Rousseau reports beginning to fully understand the true sources of modern corruption. Having long observed a steady erosion of public morality, Rousseau became aware, upon seeing the posting, that there was a connection between the moral corruption he had long observed and the rise of rationalism in the arts and sciences. Societies could no longer afford to be complacent about the detached posture adopted by modern intellectuals, because this posture of detached rationalism was partly responsible for the erosion of public morality.

Rousseau's assertions drew the jeers of his contemporaries, who rightly perceived his essay as an attack on them. In response to one of these critics, Rousseau wrote the following:

I know in advance the great words that will be used to attack me: enlightenment, knowledge, laws, morality, reason, propriety, consideration, gentleness, amenity, politeness, education, etc. To all that I will reply only with two other words, which ring even more loudly in my ear. Virtue, truth, I will write for myself constantly; Truth, virtue! If anyone perceives only words in this, I have nothing more to say to him. (*Letter to Raynal*, iii:33; ii:33)

Truth and virtue must always be considered in conjunction with one another; truth does not exist outside of an ethical or political context. Truth results, in other words, from the proper synthesis of epistemology and ontology. How we think depends on how we live. “Have you never learned that it is necessary to explain a man’s discourse by his character and not his character by his discourse?” (CC, to marquise de Verdelin, 4 Jan. 1760, 938, vii:31) Books are only as good as their authors, actions only as good as their agents, the arts and sciences only as good as the artists and scientists who are their practitioners. Rousseau was more concerned with the quality of an author than with the quality of his or her argument, confident that the quality of the person largely determines the quality of the argument.¹⁹ This explains, incidentally, Rousseau’s practice of responding to attacks on his books with a defense of his character. When contemporary authors’ books are attacked, we generally respond with a defense of our ideas—clarifications, refutations, and so forth. We generally avoid attacking the character of our critics or exalting our own, on the presupposition that the quality of one’s ideas has nothing to do with the quality of one’s character. By contrast, when Rousseau was criticized, as he very frequently was, his responses were often more defenses of his character than clarifications of his ideas. How we read—what we understand—depends, Rousseau believed, on the disposition we bring to a text, just as how we write reflects our character. If Christophe de Beaumont had attacked only his book, Rousseau could have remained silent, but Rousseau believed that Beaumont had attacked his character, and that was something he could not abide.²⁰ As long as readers mistrusted Rousseau’s

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character, no amount of analysis could redeem his ideas. In order to redeem his ideas, Rousseau believed it necessary to redeem himself.

Devotion to the truth was the most important prerequisite to accessing it, for Rousseau, more important than intellect. His favorite modern thinker was probably François Fénelon, and the quality he most admired in Fénelon was his devotion.²¹ A sincere love of truth was the quality that Rousseau respected above all else, not only as an end in itself but because he believed dedication to the truth to be a necessary prerequisite to the possession of it. Likewise, the villains in Rousseau's works have in common an insufficient devotion to the truth: Parisians, as depicted in *Julie*, and the fame-seeking writers described in the *Reveries* and the *Discourses*. Rousseau's illumination provided him with a rationale for the antipathy he felt for refined intellectuals. He began to understand the harm that follows from an abstract, dispassionate approach to intellectual questions. Philosophy, indeed the arts and sciences as a whole, Rousseau decided, provide the scaffolding for lies hidden within sophistication. In the essay he produced in response to the Academy's question, Rousseau described the "good man" as "an athlete who likes to compete in the nude." (*DAS*, iii:8; ii:6) Later, in his autobiography, Rousseau stripped himself metaphorically bare, openly confessing all of his imperfections as if to demonstrate his devotion to the truth. Rousseau makes the point in a preface to *Julie*: "You want people always to be consistent; I doubt that it is possible for man; but what is possible is for him always to be true: that is what I mean to try to be." (*NH*, ii:27; vi:20)

Rousseau focused much less on the substance of the will than on the process by which the will is formulated. As Judith Shklar has written, "Rousseau was not a professional philosopher He did not think that perfect consistency was really very important. What did matter was always to be truthful."²² The best path to truth is not to lie, a formula that sounds simple but was rarely followed, in Rousseau's experience, especially in public philosophy, where writers made use of sophisticated constructs to disguise their feelings. This book can be read as an account of what it means to "always be truthful," from a Rousseauean perspective, an account of how one must engage the world in order to grasp its fundamental truths. It is, in other words, a Rousseauean guide to truthseeking.

Notes

- 1 Some do not believe there is a system, despite Rousseau's claims to the contrary, or, perhaps it is better to say, some see it as misguided to attempt to project a synthesis onto texts that so clearly resist one. See, for example, Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau," in Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist eds., *Postmodernism: Critical Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 1998) vol. 1, 211. Others, particularly those with training in literary criticism, resist the temptation to treat texts written under different circumstances as part of a single intellectual project.
- 2 Elizabeth Rose Wingrove, "Interpretive Practices and Political Designs: Reading Authenticity, Integrity, and Reform in Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Political Theory* 29:1 (February 2001) 98.

- 3 Wingrove, “Interpretive Practices,” 110.
- 4 In his *Theories of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), Richard Kirkham begins by surveying the most common purposes of contemporary theories of truth:

“To answer the question, What is truth?
 To answer the question, What is it for something to be true?
 To answer the question, What do we mean by the terms ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’?
 To find a criterion of truth
 To provide an account of the use of ‘true’
 To find the criteria of evidence
 To show how the truth conditions of any sentence depend on the structure of that sentence
 To answer the question, What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of a statement’s truth?” (2)

These are the questions animating contemporary theories of truth. Even a book like Simon Blackburn’s *Truth: A Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2005), as accessible an inquiry into theories of truth that one is likely to come across, would nevertheless land outside of Rousseau’s philosophical gaze. Blackburn’s “guide for the perplexed” seeks to remedy a deficiency itself created by the same philosophical method he now hopes to deploy toward enlightenment. Rousseau rejected the question itself as false. It becomes an issue only for those who have been alienated from the truths made immediately available to all human beings in their natural state.

- 5 There is school of thought in contemporary philosophy, virtue epistemology, that has been interested in developing what might be called an ethics of truthseeking. Heather Battaly, in an essay on virtue epistemology, begins from the question, “What are the qualities of an excellent thinker?” “Virtue Epistemology,” *Philosophy Compass* 3:4 (2008) 639. Virtue epistemology changes the focus of inquiry from beliefs to agents, such that truth or justified belief is conceptualized as resulting from epistemically virtuous inquiry. Ryan Hanley has made the case for studying Rousseau as a virtue epistemologist. “Rousseau’s Virtue Epistemology,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50:2 (2012) 239–63. In the essay, Hanley traces the Emile’s moral development with particular attention to the relationship between “epistemic virtue” and “ethical virtue.” Hanley’s account of epistemic virtue has several affinities with what I am referring to as Rousseau’s “ethics of truthseeking.” It is worth noting one important difference as well, however. While virtue epistemology develops an ethics of the subject, it does not conceptualize truth itself in ethical terms.

- 6 See Harry Frankfurt, *On Truth* (New York: Knopf, 2006) 47–8, 36–7.

- 7 Henri Gouhier’s *Méditations Métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1984) is the closest thing to this kind of treatment of Rousseau. In that text, Gouhier leaves “education and politics, morality and aesthetics” on the “periphery” so as to read Rousseau’s work as a “contribution to the philosophical history of religious sentiment in France.” (10) Gouhier’s book treats Rousseau as a truthseeker, with particular emphasis on Rousseau’s writings on religion. However, his deeply insightful essays purport to be an account neither of Rousseau’s system nor of his theory of truth. Judith Shklar reads Rousseau as driven by the desire to “be truthful,” but she treats this desire in primarily psychological terms. *Men and Citizens* (Cambridge University Press, 1969). Christopher Kelly places Rousseau’s pledge to dedicate himself to truth at the center of *Rousseau as Author*, but he focuses mainly on the specific question of Rousseau and authorship. *Rousseau as Author: Consecrating One’s Life to Truth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

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- Most of the literature on Rousseau follows something like Harald Høffding's division of Rousseau's work into "religion, education, social and political views, and literature." *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and His Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930) xii.
- 8 "Sir, you believe me to be a philosopher, and I am not one at all." (CC, to Pasteur Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey, 6 Sept. 1760, 1097, vi:230) "I have never made a great case for philosophy, and I am absolutely detached from the party of philosophers." (CC, to Créqui, 5 Feb. 1761, 1262, viii:60)
 - 9 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Alastair Hannay (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 260.
 - 10 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 258–9.
 - 11 Rousseau's emphasis on truthseeking is reminiscent of Socrates, but Rousseau's model requires neither inordinate effort nor sophistication. It is not limited to the "few" who are capable of wisdom. It is rather available to all regardless of their sophistication; perhaps it is even more obviously available to those who lack sophistication, because it is basic and inscribed in the heart of all human beings. Truth is not part of an ethereal, esoteric realm accessed only by transcendence or ascent.
 - 12 Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) 338. "Even if it is true that Greek philosophy was founded on rationality, it always held that a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work which would make him susceptible to knowing the truth." *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) 251.
 - 13 Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2001) 169.
 - 14 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 170.
 - 15 Foucault, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 252.
 - 16 Foucault, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 251.
 - 17 Foucault, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 251.
 - 18 Gourevitch, *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) xxx. See also Charles Hendel, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Moralist* (Oxford University Press, 1934). Hendel's epigraph is taken from a letter to Du Parc: "The truth that I seek is not so much metaphysical as moral." (CC, 25 June 1761, 1092, vi:160–1)
 - 19 We must respect an author to respect his work. Rousseau experienced this fact as a paradox, because it was only through his work that he could win respect for himself. This led Rousseau to surmise that he should have published his writings in reverse. He should have written the accounts of his character first. Had he done so, perhaps the misreadings he spent the last half of his adult life rectifying never would have occurred in the first place. These misreadings, Rousseau believed, were the product of reading through the lens of a reputation already sullied by the "empire of opinion." (LDA, v:21; x:266) Had his readers known him, they never would have read him as a proponent of vice. "How could a vile man write so tenderly?", the Rousseau character asks in the *Dialogues*. (i:688; i:23)
 - 20 Christophe de Beaumont, the archbishop of Paris, wrote a letter condemning *Emile*, which, among other things, called Rousseau's faith into question.
 - 21 Rousseau's devotion to Fénelon was such that he pledged he would have gladly been Fénelon's lackey. (Gouhier, *Meditations Metaphysiques*, 18) Arthur Melzer goes so far as to suggest that it is more important to *try* to find the truth than to find it—that sincerity in the pursuit of truth is more important than the possession of truth. "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity," *American Political Science Review* 100:2 (1996) 344–60.
 - 22 Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 1.

Part One

Rousseau's Ethics of Truthseeking

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1 Rousseau’s “Great Principle”

seeker of truth
follow no path
all paths lead where
truth is here

e e cummings

In 1749, Denis Diderot sat in the donjon of the Château Vincennes, imprisoned for writing his scandalous *Letter on the Blind*, in which he challenged several Church orthodoxies. Rousseau frequently walked the road from Paris to Vincennes to visit Diderot in prison, having not yet broken from him, as he eventually would break from nearly all his friends and acquaintances. On one of those journeys, he came upon a posting for a competition inviting essays in response to the following question: “Has the rise of the arts and sciences contributed to the purification of morals?” On reading the question, Rousseau relates having been overtaken by a powerful illumination:

Oh Sir, if I had ever been able to write a quarter of what I saw and felt under that tree, how clearly I would have made all the contradictions of the social system seen, with what strength I would have exposed all the abuses of our institutions, with what simplicity I would have demonstrated that man is naturally good and that it is from these institutions alone that men become wicked. (*LMal*, i:1135–6; v:575)

Later, Rousseau would summarize everything he saw in that moment in what he came to call his “great principle” or “fundamental principle.” Stated variously in various places, Rousseau frames it in the *Dialogues* as follows: “Nature made man happy and good but society depraves him and makes him miserable.” (*D* i:934; i:213)¹ Rousseau’s philosophy of truth, like the rest of his thought, begins from this essential principle. It must be emphasized that this was *natural* goodness, not *moral* goodness, nor could it have been moral goodness, because, at our origin, Rousseau held, human beings are both pre-rational and pre-moral.

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The principle of natural goodness encompassed a few, basic qualities—pity, self-preservation, love of existence, and perfectibility—but was deployed by Rousseau primarily in a negative capacity, to characterize humanity’s problems as a reflection of socio-historical developments, as opposed to anything essential in human nature. Here Rousseau was concerned to correct an especially harmful error in standard accounts of human nature. Previous philosophers—Hobbes and Pufendorf in particular—had not gone back far enough to discover our original nature and so had mistakenly located the source of societally originating ills in human nature itself. (*DI*, iii:136; iii:21) Rousseau’s epiphany caused him to believe something very close to the opposite to be the case. If Rousseau’s fundamental principle is true, then qualities like selfishness, vanity, and cruelty originate not in human nature but in some societally instituted departure from it.

Rousseau was the first to take this approach to the study of human nature and civilization. Prior to Rousseau’s *Discourses*, the history of humankind had largely been a tale of consistent improvement, enlightenment, and moral purification. The more human beings had detached themselves from nature—liberated themselves from it—the better and happier they had become, on the conventional eighteenth-century narrative. On this account, now frequently associated with Francis Bacon, nature was to be conquered and controlled, brought into the service of human reason. Rousseau’s suggestion that the life of the savage would be preferable to our own elicited indignation and rebuke, captured most famously in Voltaire’s quip about the first *Discourse*, which he communicated to Rousseau in a personal correspondence: “One acquires the desire to walk on all fours when one reads your work.” (*Letter from Voltaire to Rousseau*, CW, iii:102) For his part, Rousseau denied that it was ever his intention to argue for a return to the state of nature—in fact, he gave a variety of reasons why such a return would be both impossible and undesirable.² Nevertheless, Rousseau was quite clear that the character of the savage—and that of the citizens of ancient Sparta and Rome, for that matter—was superior to our own. Rousseau believed that the pinnacle of human history lay in the past, not in the future, and his *corpus* can be productively approached as a series of responses to this revelation, which he frequently cited as the origin of his major writings.

The principle of original goodness has important implications for Rousseau’s philosophy of truth. It means that the truths essential to human happiness are always already within our possession—buried in the substrate of our consciousness perhaps—even when we do not perceive them clearly. Finding the truth was for Rousseau not a question of self-transcendence, but rather a question of selfhood, of listening to one’s “heart,” “conscience,” “inner sentiment,” or “inner voice,” terms which appear over and over in Rousseau’s writings. Rousseau’s fundamental principle meant that truth originates within us, in the kernel of original goodness, in the remnant of whatever remains from our natural state. Truth is, therefore, not something

to be discovered or developed, but rather something to be preserved or, in cases where it has become alienated, recovered. Truthseeking "must consist," then, "not in curing the vices of the human heart—for there are no such vices naturally—but in preventing them from being born and in keeping tightly shut the passages through which they enter." (*D*, i:687; i:23) Rousseau makes this claim in the context of a discussion of moral education, but the same goes for reverie, religion, and civic virtue, all of which secure access to the truth by shutting out external influences and listening to the inner voice or conscience.

To get anywhere with Rousseau, one must accept, if only provisionally, the principle of original goodness. This principle supplies the leverage to all of Rousseau's prescriptive arguments and to much of his social criticism. But accepting this principle, which is at odds with both the Bible's doctrine of original sin and most theories of human nature, requires quite a leap of faith. It would seem reasonable to ask of Rousseau how he can be so sure about original goodness. As with any first principle, Rousseau's capacity to justify the principle of original goodness will not be altogether conclusive or airtight. Rousseau would probably refer us to part one of the second *Discourse*. His answer there is that both virtue and vice are products of society. In their original state, human beings were governed only by an instinct for their own preservation and a sense of pity at the sight of the suffering of others, the combination of which Rousseau called "natural goodness."³ Natural goodness is a pre-moral instinct for one's own preservation coupled with empathy for the suffering of others. It is innocence as much as goodness, and, while it is the source of our moral and ethical dispositions, it was not originally a moral or ethical faculty. Natural man was good, according to Rousseau, because he had no exposure to those things that could have made him bad.

In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau attempted to "prove" this principle by developing a new science, an incipient anthropology, supported with a set of lengthy, empirically substantiated footnotes, offered as proof of his theory. However, Rousseau's belief in original goodness, I would suggest, was less the consequence of scientific evidence than it was the necessary presupposition of Rousseau's contention that humanity's ills originate with society. Rousseau's belief in original goodness was an article of faith as much as anything—"the mystical projection of the essential needs of his soul," as Pierre-Maurice Masson has put it.⁴ Rousseau believed in original goodness, because it was the necessary presupposition of the other truths Rousseau understood as essential to human happiness. This is consequentialist, of course, which may explain why Rousseau set out to establish the principle of original goodness scientifically. Nevertheless, as we will see, Rousseau frequently defended his most essential beliefs on the basis of their contribution to human happiness. Whatever confirms the essential goodness of existence *ought* to be regarded as true, and as we will see over the course of this book, Rousseau's philosophy of truth counsels that we treat *as true* those principles that serve human happiness.

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Rousseau's demonstrative arguments for original goodness are less persuasive. He admits right away that the state of nature is something that resists comprehension. It is something that "no longer exists, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist, and about which it is necessary to have precise notions in order to judge our present state correctly." (*DI*, iii:123; iii:13) In Rousseau's treatise on education, his pupil reads ancients more than moderns, because, Rousseau writes, "they came first and so are closest to nature." (*E*, iv:676; xiii:516) This argument fails on two levels. Not only does it presuppose that nature is good, but it also assumes that proximity to nature can be determined on the basis of chronology alone.

Original goodness is the "great principle" of Rousseau's system, and, as is generally the case with such principles, it is subject to a variety of criticisms, whether psychoanalytic, philosophical, or anthropological. It may be the case that Rousseau's reverence for original goodness was a refusal of difference, a projection of an unacknowledged insistence that the world conform to his psychological needs.⁵ One can debate the philosophical or historical plausibility of the principle of original goodness, but what is not debatable is that this principle is the basic premise of Rousseau's philosophical system. Rousseau evaluated everything against the standard of natural goodness, which he envisioned as a personal, unmediated relationship to one's own existence—a communion or *convenance* with one's surroundings. Rousseau's literary life was dedicated to recapturing this Edenic moment of perfect communion. It was this moment—its rupture and potential recuperation—that drove Rousseau's various explorations of the human condition.

"The first impulses or impulses of nature derive from *amour de soi* and are loving and gentle." (*D*, i:669; i:9) This was the radical, anti-Hobbesian stance that Rousseau made the foundation of his philosophical system. Neither Locke, nor Mandeville, nor Montesquieu, nor the *philosophes*, however great their departures from Hobbes, were willing to go as far as Rousseau. They held that natural impulses were not all bad or that they could be controlled by reason; none, however, suggested that our natural impulses were "loving and gentle." Rousseau's understanding of natural goodness enabled him to surprise his critics with a preference for idleness over activity, sentiment over reason, simplicity over sophistication. In a letter to Mirabeau, Rousseau turned charges of withdrawal and self-absorption to his favor.

In censuring this nonchalance, you will be reinforcing for me that to be good only for oneself is to be good for nothing; I believe that whoever is truly good for himself is also in some way good for others. (*CC*, to Victor Riquetti marquis de Mirabeau, 31 January 1767, 5695, xxxiii:83)

As compared to the active assertions of modern men and women, the self-absorbed simplicity of those who retain their natural goodness serves both the individual and the society in which she lives. Humanity's ills come not

from our inherent inclination toward self-love but rather from the perversion of that inclination by *amour propre* and its associated institutions of inequality.⁶ In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau, while tracing the origins and development of civilization, lingers at the moment where class distinctions began to solidify.

If this were the place to go into details, I could easily show how, even without the Government's intervention, inequality of prestige and authority becomes inevitable among private individuals as soon as, united in one society, they are forced to compare themselves one with the other and, in the continual use they have to make of one another, to take account of the differences they find. . . . I would show how much this universal desire for reputation, honors, and preferment which consumes us all exercises and compares talents and strengths, how much it excites and multiplies the passions and, in making all men competitors, rivals, or rather enemies, how many reverses, how many successes, how many catastrophes of every kind it daily causes. . . . (*DI*, iii:188–9; iii:63)

The movement out of nature and into society is a movement outside of oneself and into the judgment of others. While the savage lives "within himself," the "sociable man" lives only "outside himself." Self-esteem becomes a function of the opinion of others and, where the savage could find happiness in "the sentiment of his own existence," civilized men and women can only be happy with themselves "on the testimony of others." (*DI*, iii:193; iii:66)⁷

This account of the origins of *amour propre* is generally read as part of a history of morality, but there is more to the story than that. While it is certainly the case that Rousseau's account of the rise of *amour propre* is about morality and its alienation, it is also a diagnosis of humanity's self-inflicted alienation from truth. The two issues—morality and truthseeking—are closely related. The activity of *amour propre*—its active agent—is the masking of the truth.⁸ When Rousseau describes the moral effects of *amour propre*, he emphasizes its duplicity: "in the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, politeness, and sublime maxims, we have only a deceitful and frivolous exterior." (*DI*, iii:66; iii:193) Truthseeking becomes so urgent for Rousseau because humanity's ills stem from the fact that the truth has been masked and subverted by *amour propre*.⁹

The framework of Rousseau's philosophy of truth—that truth is singular and the pathways to it many—is grounded in and, in turn, depends upon the principle that Rousseau placed at the center of his philosophical system: that human beings are born good and are corrupted by society. Victor Gourevitch has noted that human beginnings should not be understood as good without qualification in Rousseau's state of nature.¹⁰ True enough, but for our purposes, it is more important to understand that Rousseau used the idea of natural goodness as a standard against which he evaluated modern

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society. “Original goodness” was a largely negative concept—Rousseau’s idea of what human beings would be like if it were possible to subtract everything that society has added on: “It is sufficient for me to have proved that this is not the original state of man; and that it is the spirit of society alone, and the inequality it engenders, which thus change and alter all our natural inclinations.” (*DI*, iii:193; iii:67) Rousseau evaluated everything on the basis of its proximity to or distance from original goodness. At times, the path back to original goodness was circuitous, but the essential heuristic remained unchanged. Original goodness provided the critical leverage for Rousseau’s various critiques of modern society, whether it be his critique of Voltaire on providence, of Hobbes on the state of nature, of literate Europe in the first *Discourse*, of natural law theorists on political deliberation, of wet nurses, of medicine, of cities, of Rameau on music, and on and on.

On this reading, the second *Discourse* provides the foundation for what Rousseau called his “system.” Rousseau’s later writings ought to be read in the context of the pathologies identified in the second *Discourse*.¹¹ The second *Discourse* is a chronicle of humanity’s alienation from natural goodness, while *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, *Julie*, and the *Reveries* describe ways of recuperating natural goodness in a modern context. Rousseau’s heuristic across these later texts begins with a refusal of *amour propre*, a retreat from society, and a turn inward, toward the inner voice or *sentiment intérieur*. The first step on any pathway toward truth will be a backward one—a step away from *amour propre*, which is simultaneously a step toward original goodness. “Let us begin by . . . circumscribing our soul with the same limits that nature has given to our being.” (*LM*, iv:1112; xii:198) The path toward truth begins with a refusal of philosophy, the arts and sciences, and the “empire of opinion,”¹² which is to say, a refusal of the apparatus of *amour propre*.

In *Emile*, Rousseau specifies how the process of self-circumscribing ought to take place. The pupil, Emile, is taught to shun ideas he cannot discover and verify on his own. This means that, while he will know very little, what he does know will truly be his own and he will know nothing “halfway.” (*E*, iv:487; xiii:358) Emile’s first, and most important, lesson is a negative one:

Among the small number of things he knows and knows well, the most important is that there are many things of which he is ignorant and which he can know one day; there are many more that other men know that he will never know in his life; and there are an infinite number of others that no man will ever know. (*E*, iv:487; xiii:358)

There is not much that we can know, but what we do need to know is obvious enough, so long as we manage to stay out of our own way: “to live happily and be worthy of happiness,” as Joseph Reisert has summed it up.¹³ Everything else is superfluous, including most of the questions that Rousseau observed philosophers busying themselves with. “Is there a single

principle of things? Or are there two or many?" Rousseau asked rhetorically in the *Letter to Beaumont*. (*LB*, iv:953; ix:42) These questions and others of a similarly abstract or esoteric nature, Rousseau continued, are of no interest: "I renounce idle questions which may disturb my *amour propre*." (*LB*, iv:953; ix:42) The vicar makes the point to the young Rousseau:

I seek only to know what is important for my conduct. As for the dogmas which have an influence neither on actions nor on morality, and about which so many men torment themselves, I do not trouble myself about them at all. (*E*, iv:627; xiii:475)

Truth in a "general and abstract" sense is the "most precious of all goods." A concern for esoteric or sophisticated truths, however, is both futile (inasmuch as a thoroughgoing understanding of most of these questions is beyond our capacity to understand) and, what is much worse, subversive of our urgent need to recover the only truths that really do matter. (*R*, i:1026; viii:29–30)¹⁴

The starting point for truthseekers is the recognition that ignorance is not nearly as dangerous as error. "Humility" is, therefore, the "first lesson of wisdom." (*LM*, iv:1100; xii:189) We are far more likely to be harmed by an excess of learning than by the absence of it. Indeed, it was in large part the desire to be refined and sophisticated that led to our alienation from the simple truths of human happiness in the first place. The simple truths of happiness, known immediately to human beings in their natural state, now lie buried under the weight of civilization. This has left modern men and women miserable and corrupt. In order for them to be rehabilitated, it will be necessary to jettison the discourse of modern intellectualism and reclaim the "sublime science of simple souls." (*DAS*, iii:30; ii:22) This is an ethical problem more than a metaphysical or epistemological one, which is why I have chosen to refer to Rousseau's philosophy of truth as an ethics of truthseeking. Rousseau was not concerned to debate the existence of universal truth or the possibility of knowing it. Rousseau accepted on faith both the existence of truth—if only those truths essential to human happiness—and its susceptibility to human understanding. His was, therefore, an *ethics* of truth—an account of what modern, post-lapsarian human beings must do in order to recapture the basic truths necessary to their happiness.

Notes

- 1 See also *LB*, iv:935–6; ix:28 and *E*, iv:322; xiii:225: "Let us set down this incontestable maxim: first movements of nature are right." In a letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau described the content of his basic principle: "man is naturally good, and it is only by institutions that men become bad." (*CC*, to Malesherbes, 12 January 1762, 1633, x:26)
- 2 Rousseau addresses this question repeatedly in a series of responses to critics of the first *Discourse*. (iii:31–107; ii:23–174)

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- 3 "First of all, it seems to me that everything moral inside of me always relates to something outside of me; that I would have neither vice nor virtue if I had always lived alone, and that I would be good by virtue of this absolute goodness alone, which does but one thing, which is the one thing it must do by its nature." Rousseau, "Letters on Virtue," in M. G. Streckeisen-Moultou ed., *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, Libraires-Éditeurs, 1861) 135.
- 4 *La Religion de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Hachette, 1916) vol. II, 263. Rousseau seems to concede the point in a little known letter, probably written in 1757, that appears neither in the Pléiade edition of Rousseau writings, nor in Leigh's edition of Rousseau's correspondence: "I would like, therefore, to have soul that is strong, in order to always do that which is just and sensitive, in order to always love that which is beautiful: but what is beauty, sensibility, and justice? And what is a strong soul? Here is what the most sublime philosophy has real trouble explaining to us; it explains far less for those who seek the truth that it does for those who seek science. Let us be content to listen to nature, because, even if nature, well-consulted, does not always enlighten us, at least it never leads us astray." (Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 135)
- 5 "... and should my reason lead me astray in pursuit [of virtue], I will console myself easily amidst an error that renders me all the more a good man." (Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 134)
- 6 The concept of *amour propre* is central to Rousseau's critique of modern society. *Amour propre* is born in society as a desire for the recognition of others and tends to manifest itself in the form of domination and inequality. This is the sense in which Rousseau generally uses the term and, unless otherwise specified, it is the sense in which I use it in this book. However, *amour propre* need not necessarily result in corruption. When it is broadened beyond an exclusive concern for oneself, Rousseau suggests that *amour propre* could be directed toward a concern for the welfare of others. It is important to distinguish the positive from the negative effects of *amour-propre*, as much of the recent scholarship on Rousseau has done. See, for example, N. J. H. Dent, *Rousseau* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Laurence Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Michael Locke McLendon, "Rousseau and the Minimal Self: A Solution to the Problem of *amour-propre*," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13:3 (2014) 341–61.
- 7 "Everyone hates everything that is not himself more readily than he loves himself." (*D*, i:891; i:179) The enjoyment derived from *amour propre* comes not (only) from a thing in itself but from the way in which one's enjoyment of the thing distinguishes one from others. Civilized men and women are like the selfish husband from Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. They want to "enjoy the light of the sun to the exclusion of everybody else." (Los Angeles: Indo-European Publishing, 2010) 57.
- 8 "The man of the world is whole in his mask." (*E*, iv:515; xiii:383)
- 9 In society, human beings inevitably begin to measure themselves in comparison to others. Rousseau refers to this tendency as *amour propre* and contrasts it with natural man's entirely self-regarding pursuit of his own interest, which Rousseau calls *amour de soi*. *Amour de soi* refers to natural man's instinct to focus on himself, in particular his own preservation. "Without reflection," Rousseau wrote in the *Discourse on Inequality*, natural man focused on his own protection and was

not tempted to harm others. This, combined with an instinct for pity, resulted in his adhering to the "maxim of natural goodness . . . : *Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others.*" (*DI*, iii:156; iii:37, 38)

Amour de soi is based in instinct and is wholly self-regarding, while *amour propre* is a product of reason and is born of a concern for the esteem of others. But *amour propre* should not be understood as the opposite of *amour de soi*. Properly cultivated (i.e., in service to communion), *amour propre*, can be developed out of *amour de soi*, as we will see in chapter two. When *amour propre* is cultivated in conjunction with the desire for a *communion des coeurs*, it can recapture the sublime immediacy of the savage's *amour de soi*. For an insightful account of the relationship between *amour propre* and *amour de soi*, see Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 152–60.

- 10 "The Religious Thought," in Patrick Riley ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 204. Arthur Melzer makes a similar point in *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 16.
- 11 One implication is that one must be very careful about Rousseau's early writings and letters, in which he is seeking the voice he finds after the illumination. But, more importantly for our purposes, Rousseau directs us to read intertextually. He frequently refers to the principle of original goodness in other texts, though it is only in the second *Discourse* that he systematically discusses it.
- 12 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 138.
- 13 *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: A Friend of Virtue* (Cornell University Press, 2003) 196.
- 14 Such is the advice that Rousseau gives to Sophie d'Houdetot in a series of letters he wrote in response to her request for rules of morality. There, Rousseau proposes an examination of "everything that one ought to think, feel, and believe in order to be as happy as the human conditions permits." (*LM*, iv:1087; xii:179–80)

2 Communion

Among the many tensions in Rousseau's *corpus*, perhaps the most constitutive and pervasive is his endorsement of mutually exclusive pathways to happiness—the citizen, on the one hand, epitomized for Rousseau by Cato, and the solitary, on the other, epitomized by Socrates. On the one hand, Rousseau harshly criticized society and romanticized the independence of “natural man,” the solitary walker, and the highly circumscribed education of Emile. On the other, he wrote paeans to Rome, Geneva, Sparta, and Corsica, and he argued that the solution to the problems of modern society lay in a solidaristic republic of virtuous citizens. In one of the most well-known passages in the entirety of his *corpus*, Rousseau punctuates the distinction: “Forced to combat nature or the social institutions,” Rousseau wrote of Emile’s education, “one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time.” (*E*, iv:248; xiii:163)

This tension has served as a fulcrum for much of Rousseau scholarship. Victor Gourevitch, for example, introduces his translation of the *Social Contract* by distinguishing between “man” and “citizen,” which he describes as “fundamentally different ways of life.”¹ Steven Kautz goes further, distinguishing between “two Rousseau’s: the sentimental, aesthetic, romantic, individualist of the *Reveries* and (sometimes) *Emile* and other ‘private’ works; and the virtuous, patriotic, democratic collectivist of the *Social Contract* and other ‘political’ works.”² Frank Manuel distinguishes between the *moi* and the *moi commun*, which he regards as contradictory impulses.³ These writers are not wrong to draw a sharp distinction between the solitary and the citizen. Rousseau does so himself: “Make man social or leave him alone; if you divide him, you destroy him.” (*Political Fragment*, OC, iii:510) However, it is possible to exaggerate the opposition between the solitary and the citizen and, in so doing, obscure important aspects of Rousseau’s philosophical system. The aspiration of both the *moi* and the *moi commun* is a desire for communion, a desire embedded in the substrate of human consciousness—the legacy of the savage and the ancient republics of Sparta and Rome. Whatever their differences, Rousseau’s models of reconciliation embody his ideal of an unmediated, authentic extension of being. Rousseau often uses the term “communion” itself to refer to this phenomenon, but he

also describes it as “attachment,” “the extension of being,” “organic sensitivity,” “making oneself one with . . . ,” “love of order,” “unity,” and “generality.” All of these, though distinct in their connotations and contexts, reflect a desire to live “*au sein d’un ordre*,” as Pierre Burgelin has put it—⁴ not necessarily a social order but something larger than oneself, a larger order that accommodates the desire to “extend one’s being” or to order the soul to a larger relation—to “make oneself one” with something beyond oneself. The aspiration of both the *moi* and the *moi commun* springs from a more basic desire for communion, a desire embedded in the substrate of human consciousness—the legacy of the savage and the ancient republics of Sparta and Rome.⁵

Of late, a few of Rousseau’s interpreters have moved away from the solitary/citizen binary by reading Rousseau through the lens of existence or “maximized existence.”⁶ Laurence Cooper, for example, has written:

Rousseau holds that there is one good, arising from one desire, that outranks all others and indeed comprehends them, in the sense that these other goods *are* good only to the extent that they participate in or contribute to the primary good.⁷

To move beyond the solitary/citizen binary, it is necessary to establish some more general goal or “good,” as Cooper calls it, one that encompasses the solitary and the citizen and *to which* the life of the solitary and the citizen contribute. This primary good, as Cooper sees it, is maximized existence. Cooper’s emphasis on existence represents a sharp departure from more traditional approaches to Rousseau, which emphasize virtue or freedom. By focusing on ontology as opposed to ethics or politics, Cooper is able to stare down the standard binaries of Rousseau scholarship. In this, he has helped to rescue Rousseau from readings that overemphasize his paradoxes and contradictions. Similarly, Christopher Kelly has focused on the centrality of what he, following Rousseau, refers to as “feeling one’s own existence.”⁸

Cooper and Kelly are onto something important, insofar as they have recognized an underlying sentiment that transcends Rousseau’s disparate images of reconciliation. Where their analyses fall short, it seems to me, is in their neglect of the relative aspect of existence. As we will see in the sections that follow, the “sentiment of existence” or “feeling one’s existence” is always experienced in conjunction with something outside of oneself, whether it be nature, God, or other human beings. Cooper, while acknowledging the centrality of the “sentiment of existence” to Rousseau’s thought, is nevertheless puzzled by the concept: “To experience the sentiment of existence seems to mean nothing other than simply to feel alive.”⁹ Cooper’s definition is so spare because he approaches the sentiment of existence in “formal” or “structural” terms, as he puts it.¹⁰ For Cooper, the content of existence remains indeterminate, and he treats Rousseau as agnostic with respect to any “particular condition or state of being or content of

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consciousness that constitutes the good for human beings.”¹¹ However, as I will show, Rousseau was not agnostic on this issue. He valued existence to be sure, but the feeling of existence is sublime, Rousseau believed, only when experienced in relation to something beyond oneself: God, nature, or fellow human beings. Communion animates the desire to “extend our being,” providing the substantive correlative to the formality of the sentiment of existence.¹² The sentiment of existence, in other words, is more communal than liberal interpretations would allow. It is a sense of oneself in the world.

Cooper and Kelly are correct that for Rousseau “pride of place” belongs to “something experiential.”¹³ As Rousseau wrote in *Emile*, “The man who has lived the most is not he who has counted the most years but he who has most felt life.” (*E*, iv:253; xiii:167) But it is important to think about what it means to have “most felt life.” It is in communion, I will show in this chapter, that human beings feel life most thoroughly. It is not just existence but extending one’s existence that unifies Rousseau’s various responses to the predicament of modern life.

In Rousseau’s early essays on the arts and sciences, on inequality, and on language, communion appears mostly as an absent presence, animating Rousseau’s critique of the divisiveness of modernity, both at the social level and within each individual. It appears nostalgically, in the savage’s communion with nature and the Spartan’s civic fellowship, and stands as the ideal against which Rousseau judges modern societies deficient. It appears in the valorization of ancient and Southern languages, which Rousseau saw as warm and amorous, over modern and Northern languages, which Rousseau saw as cold and utilitarian. Later in his literary career, in the *Social Contract*, *Letter to d’Alembert*, *Emile*, and *Julie*, Rousseau moves beyond nostalgia and begins to imagine how ancient communion might be reconstituted in a context of *amour propre*. Finally, in his writings on solitude—the *Reveries* in particular but also in the *Dialogues* and letters to Malesherbes—when Rousseau has ostensibly given up on the quest for communion, he rediscovers the savage’s primal connection to the physical world. The ensuing sections of this chapter explore the evolution and continuity of communion in each of these contexts with particular attention to the solitary/citizen binary.

I. Communion in the State of Nature

By nature, human beings exist in balance with their surroundings, seeking only to avoid pain and hunger and to satisfy basic needs—food, a mate, and rest. At this stage, we perceive and we sense, but we do not yet reason and so do not require any of the supplements that have become necessities for civilized men and women. Our needs are few and our capacity to satisfy them is sufficient. Communion is natural to the savage because she has everything she desires within immediate reach and does not desire anything that lies beyond her immediate reach. When her spear lands off

target or her shelter has been appropriated, she moves on to her next task without bitterness or regret.

“Savage man,” as Rousseau called pre-social human beings, was “given over to the sole sentiment of [his] present existence.” (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28) He did not wonder at the marvels of nature because he was a part of nature. He had not yet learned to adopt the detached posture that is a prerequisite for one who would marvel. Nature was “so familiar to him that he [became] indifferent to it.” (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28) Nature did not, therefore, have the romantic connotations for him that it does for us, because he had not yet experienced the alienation *from* nature that is a precondition for the romantic longing *for* it. The natural world was not something to be accessed, marveled at, and eventually left behind, in favor of more comfortable, refined surroundings. The savage was present in nature in his “present existence,” as Rousseau put it. (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28) He sensed immediately and perpetually what we now sense only intermittently and only with the aid of supplements like philosophy, to which we now must turn in order to reclaim what we once knew without instruction. The savage was both in nature and of it, and so his sense of communion with nature was entirely unmediated.

Rousseau was concerned to demonstrate that the division visited upon human beings stems not from a constitutive insufficiency in our nature, but rather from our decision to build civilization on inequality and *amour propre*. The modern subject’s desire for communion is the result of her having become alienated from her original, immediate connection to her environment. When human beings abandoned the state of nature, the simple, unmediated relation to their surroundings was lost, never to be reclaimed in its pristine form. The slow migration out of the state of nature created a series of divisions: present and future, mine and thine, reason and sentiment, good and evil. With this migration, reason and morality became a part of the human condition for the first time. But it was also experienced as “distance from pure sensations,” as Rousseau put it in the second *Discourse*. (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28) This distance is felt by modern human beings as alienation and is accompanied by a desire to recuperate original goodness. To do this, we follow mediated pathways, hoping that they will lead back to the unmediated communion experienced in the state of nature.¹⁴ All too often, unfortunately, they do not, because corrupt forms of *amour propre* are so pervasive in modern society.

Most societies, as Rousseau saw them, had substituted a debauched social bond for the immediate communion of the state of nature. It turns out that not all social bonds are good. In the first *Discourse*, Rousseau summarizes the nature of the social bond that typically predominates in modern societies.

Today, when subtler inquiries and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to principles, a vile and deceiving uniformity prevails in our morals, and all minds seem to have been cast in the same mold: constantly politeness demands, propriety commands: constantly

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one follows custom, never one's own genius. One no longer dares to appear what one is; and under this perpetual constraint, the men who make up the herd that is called society will, when placed in similar circumstances, all act in similar ways unless more powerful motives incline them differently. (*DAS*, iii:8; ii:6)

This is the nature of the corrupt bond that emerges from the arts and sciences, commerce, and luxury. Rousseau's critique reads initially like a plea for individualism, and it is, but it is also a plea for an alternate, honest, heartfelt communion of hearts. Rousseau urges us to follow our own genius, because the universal goodness we find there will be the basis for an authentic moral unity, without the herdlike conformity. There are a variety of pathways to an authentic communion of hearts, each of which begins with an inward turn—a refusal of the “vile and deceiving uniformity”—and only then expands slowly outward.

Properly directed, *amour propre* can be the basis for moral excellence and civic solidarity. When inflamed, however, *amour propre* fuels a proliferation of needs and makes one dependent on the opinion of others. This latter manifestation of *amour propre* is a refusal of communion, even though it is born with intersubjectivity. Jean Starobinski, in an essay titled “Rousseau and eloquence,” introduces a distinction between “good” and “bad” eloquence that is equally useful for distinguishing between good and bad *amour propre*. Good eloquence is distinguished from bad, Starobinski argues, on the basis of its object: “I believe that it is necessary to turn to the conceptual double separate/gather (*séparer—rassembler*), so often used by Rousseau to understand that which allowed, in his eyes, for the distinction between good and bad eloquence.”¹⁵ We might draw a similar distinction between the good and bad effects of *amour propre*. When deployed in the service of *rassemblement*, *amour propre* takes the salutary form of patriotism. When deployed to distinguish oneself from another, *amour propre* leads to separation.

Prior to the birth and proliferation of *amour propre*, this complex negotiation was not necessary. Rousseau contrasts the mediated love of self, characteristic of civilized men and women (*amour propre*), with the unmediated love of self, characteristic of human beings in their natural state (*amour de soi*). The latter is self-sufficient and self-sustaining—the steady action of the soul's stable relationship to its environment. The savage had no need to turn from social corruption because he did not know it, no need to repel (or generalize) *amour propre*, because it had not yet stirred in his soul.

The original unity of the savage's existence, once lost, cannot be reclaimed, but neither can the desire for it be suppressed. This produces a desire to “extend one's being”—a felicitous phrase that Rousseau used to encompass both the domination that follows from inflamed *amour propre* and the communion that follows from a well-ordered soul. Unity must be reconstituted using a variety of available supplements—e.g., love of the *patrie*, a rural

household, reverie, and religious worship—which constitute pathways to a renewal of humanity’s original order, a new way to *exister au sein d’un ordre*.

As Rousseau entered his period of greatest literary achievement (1758–1762), during which he composed *Julie*, the *Social Contract*, and *Emile*, he began to imagine how the immediate communion of the state of nature might be recuperated in a modern, mediated context, whether it be in the circumscribed world of a small country estate (*Julie*), in the political context of a republic of equals (the *Social Contract*), in a personal relationship with God or nature (*Letter to Beaumont* and the *Reveries*), or in the moral education of a child (*Emile*). There are, broadly speaking, two possible responses to the alienation that usually accompanies *amour propre*: One can either retreat from *amour propre* so as to insulate oneself from its effects (e.g., the solitary) or else generalize it completely (e.g., the citizen), such that one either withdraws entirely from the social order or becomes immersed in it so thoroughly that, in acting out of love for oneself, one simultaneously acts for the sake of one’s compatriots. *Amour de soi*, is, on this reading, the first manifestation of the human desire for communion, an immediate love of existence based on an unconscious harmony between oneself and nature’s order.¹⁶ This inchoate form of communion becomes the basis for the more refined manifestations of it in society.

II. Communion in Society

In Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau identifies a proto-social moment, prior to the famous fencing off of property that births human society in the *Discourse on Inequality*. This earlier moment in Rousseau’s historical anthropology—the birth of language—is the first stage of human beings’ transition from solitude to society, from communion with nature to communion with one’s fellows.

As soon as one man was recognized by another as a sentient Being, thinking and similar to himself, the desire or the need to communicate his feelings and thoughts to him made him seek the means for doing so. (*L*, v:375; vii:289–90)

Rousseau envisions language not in instrumental terms—all of our physical needs could be satisfied without the cooperation of others—but rather as a product of our psycho-social development. At some stage in our moral development, we came to see other human beings as akin to ourselves instead of exclusively as potential impediments or aids to the satisfaction of our appetites. Once we recognized in other human beings a consciousness comparable to our own, they became another avenue by which we might extend our being. This not only accounts for the origin of language, it also provided the standard by which Rousseau compared and evaluated languages. In particular, he was interested in the differences he observed

between languages originating in northern Europe and those originating in the southern part of the continent. Southern languages, born in hospitable climates, were, to Rousseau's ear, more musical and amorous than were Northern languages, born more out of necessity than emotion. The harsher Northern climates yielded peoples whose first utterance was "help me" (*aidez-moi*), while the milder Southern climates produced the more heartfelt "love me" (*aimez-moi*). (*L*, v:408; vii:316) Language, if it is to fulfill its purpose, must retain its musicality.¹⁷ Southern languages, Rousseau argued, better preserve the ancient isomorphism between music and language. This allows Southern languages to better facilitate the universal desire for communion. In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau explained his preference for music over painting, by reference to communion.

Painting is often dead and inanimate, it can transport you to the middle of a desert; but as soon as vocal signs strike your ear, they proclaim a being similar to yourself; they are, so to speak, the organs of the soul, and if they also depict solitude for you, they tell you that you are not alone there. Birds whistle, man alone sings, and one cannot hear either a song or an instrumental piece without immediately saying to oneself: another sensitive being is present. (*L*, v:421; vii:326)¹⁸

As this passage illustrates, Rousseau evaluated language, music, and painting through the ethico-political lens of communion.¹⁹ Painting, however beautiful or profound, does not speak to the essential human desire for communion. This distinction—between that which facilitates communion and that which inhibits it—provides the framework for the judgments Rousseau makes about music and language, as it will for those he makes about religion, politics, and reverie.

In his debate with Rameau on the state of French music, Rousseau targeted Rameau's argument for the relative priority of harmony over melody. Rousseau favored melody, arguing that the moral effects of harmony are minimal and anodyne, while melody gives music its affective dimension.

The most beautiful chords . . . can convey to the senses an agreeable sensation and nothing more. But the accents of the voice pass all the way to the soul, for they are the natural expression of the passions, and by depicting them they arouse them. It is by means of them that music becomes oratorical, eloquent, imitative, they form its language; it is by means of them that it portrays objects to the imagination, that it conveys feelings to the heart.²⁰

The essence of musical expression, as Rousseau understood it, lay in its evocation of passion, and it is melody, not harmony, that speaks most profoundly to the soul. Harmony, as beautiful as it can be, "flatters the ear" but fails to "touch the heart." (*DM*, v:951; vii:450)²¹

Rousseau makes an analogous argument with respect to the relative superiority of ancient languages over modern ones. He contrasts the “sonorous, prosodic, harmonious languages” of antiquity with the sophisticated, highly articulated, and, therefore, staid languages of modernity. (*L*, v:428; vii:332) In modern languages, speech and music have become separated, to the detriment of both. As a consequence of this separation, melody has “lost its ancient energy.” Language no longer produces “moral effects,” by which Rousseau had in mind the *communion des coeurs* that was the result of the warm, musical languages of antiquity. (*L*, v:424, 427; vii:329, 331)

In ancient times, when persuasion took the pace of public force, eloquence was necessary. What use could it serve today . . . the subjects must be kept scattered: this is the first maxim of modern politics. (*L*, v:428; vii:331–2)

In the golden age, language was nothing other than rhythm, poetry, and music. “To say and to sing were one,” and language served to unify rather than scatter subjects, to “bring one person closer to another (*rapproche plus l’homme de l’homme*).” (*L*, v:410–411, 421; vii:318, 326) It is not surprising that Rousseau’s political theory held in such high esteem the ancient republics for which these languages of communion or *rapprochement* were the *langues-mères*.

Neither is it surprising that recent scholarship on the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and on Rousseau’s music theory has revealed in those texts a model for the *rapprochement* of citizens theorized in Rousseau’s more explicitly political writings.²² Rousseau’s political theory, like his theories of language and music, valorized institutions, practices, and mores that gathered up (*rassembler*) otherwise scattered people: “As it is said that beauty is only the assemblage of the most common traits,” Rousseau wrote in a fragment on politics, “it can be said that virtue is only the collection of the most general wills.” (*Political Fragment*, OC, iii:483)²³ Rousseau’s language, always spirited, becomes incandescent when he describes the sentiment of citizenship. In an entry for Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*, for example, Rousseau described patriotism as “sweeter than the love of a mistress.” Cato superseded even Socrates, in Rousseau’s estimation, for his ability to inspire this sentiment, to literally make people happy. (*PE*, iii:255; iii:151) In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, at the end of an extended, often dry exegesis on Genevan political institutions, Rousseau concludes by summarizing the general aim toward which all of his specific recommendations are geared:

But above all come together. You are ruined without resource if you remain divided. And why would you be divided when such great common interests unite you? . . . In a word, it is less a question of deliberation here than of concord; the choice of which course you will take is not the greatest question: Were it bad in itself, take it all together; by

that alone it will become the best, and you will always do what needs to be done provided that you do so in concert. (iii:29; ix:306)

Here Rousseau suggests that the ideal of unity and fellowship animated the various recommendations he made to Geneva in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, a largely technical and pragmatic work that focuses on the design of republican institutions and the problem of representation. Likewise, in extolling the virtues of Corsica, it is the preservation of Corsicans' innate "harmony" and the forestalling of "divisions" that guides Rousseau's advice. (Cor, iii:903; xi:125) Harmony is the natural state of the Corsican people, Rousseau posits. To the extent that divisions exist, they are manufactured—an "artifice of their masters for making them weak and dependent." (Cor, iii:903; xi:125) In these texts, Rousseau describes strategies for nurturing the harmony that exists at the base of every nation, though it was far more submerged among the French than it was among the Corsicans.

In his essay on Poland, Rousseau offered the same advice to the Poles that he had given to Geneva and Corsica. Everything is to be geared toward the cultivation of unity. "Nothing exclusive, if possible for the great and the rich. Many spectacles in the open air, where the ranks might be carefully distinguished, but where the people take part equally as among the ancients." (GP, iii:963; xi:177) Rousseau invokes here, as he so frequently did, the Spartans' ardent "love of the fatherland," which exceeded in intensity their love of anything else, making them, in Rousseau's view, the greatest of all peoples. Sparta's patriotism allowed it to overcome the divisiveness that left others subject to conquest and internal strife; it allowed them to transcend the limitations of vanity and self-interest, to transcend ordinary human failings, to be, as Rousseau put it, "beings above humanity." (GP, iii:957; xi:172) Rousseau appeals to the Poles' desire for transcendence—to the basic and universal human desire to belong to something bigger or better than oneself—just as he will do later in describing the benefits of solitary reverie. Under the right circumstances, both experiences—love of the *patrie* and solitary reverie—draw us out of ourselves, making it possible for us to consecrate ourselves to something more than self-interest. This is the context of Rousseau's invocation of "beings above humanity," a formulation that will also return in the *Reveries*.

Rousseau's writings are productively approached as an exploration of the desire to commune or, alternately, as an account of the origin, corruption, and possible rehabilitation of that desire. The drive toward communion is most evident in Rousseau's political writings, but it is also a prominent theme in his writings on solitude, religion, moral education, as well as in his epistolary novel, in which an idealized communion is depicted even in the midst of a frustrated love affair. Here, Julie, the novel's protagonist, describes her life on the Clarens estate.

I am surrounded by all those I care about, for me all of creation is here; I enjoy at once the attachment I have for my friends, that which

they return to me, that which they have for each other; their mutual solicitude either emanates from me or relates to me; everything I see is an extension of my being, and nothing divides it; it resides in all that surrounds me, no portion of it remains far from me; there is nothing left for my imagination to do, there is nothing for me to desire; to feel and to enjoy are to me one and the same thing; I live at once in all those I love, I am sated with happiness and life. (*NH*, ii:689; vi:566)²⁴

Rousseau creates a vivid image of what he had in mind when speaking of “truths that pertain to human happiness.” At Clarens, Julie is able to sense rather than think; she can be passive rather than assertive; and, perhaps most importantly, she is free of *amour propre*. While intensely concerned about the people around her, she does not compare herself to them, feel inferior or superior to them, or judge them in any way. She can simply commune in an openhearted, tolerant atmosphere of mutual acceptance. At Clarens, *les amitiés* communicate more through gesture than through words, which cannot convey the feelings of human communion. Friends gather in silence, simply enjoying the pleasure of existence.

The same phenomenon recurs in Rousseau’s most sublime evocations of Christian piety, the essence of which is expressed in the silent acceptance of communion. Rousseau’s various interventions into theological debates or the politics of religious conflict are guided by a desire for communion. When accused of violating Christian principles (as he very frequently was after the publication of *Emile*), Rousseau generally tried to circumvent thorny, doctrinal questions and appeal instead to a few basic tenets, which could unite a diversity of believers. In a letter to the abbé de Carondelet, Rousseau attempted a *rassemblement* of different views of the origin of morality.

It is very true that without wholly sharing the sentiment of my brothers and without disguising my own in the process, I have accommodated myself very well to theirs; I do not argue at all about the rest, which seems hardly important to me. While waiting to know with certainty who among us is right, and, as long as they suffer my company in their communion, I will continue to live there in true attachment. Truth, for us, is covered by a veil but peace and unity are certain. (*CC*, 4 March 1764, 3166, xix:200)

There is much that human beings do not know and, indeed, cannot know. As a consequence, most of the specialized debates in theology and philosophy are, at best, futile, and, at worst, destructive, insofar as they undermine the few truths that *are* essential to human happiness. What can be known with certainty, in Rousseau’s view, is that communion is a terminal good, that it is universally pursued, and that it is essential to human happiness. From this starting point, Rousseau concluded that doctrinal disputes ought to be avoided when possible and resolved ecumenically when necessary, so as to be maximally inclusive.

34 Rousseau's Ethics of Truthseeking

In response to an inquiry about the persecution of Protestants, to take one example, Rousseau attempted to reconcile not only Catholic and Protestant but secular and religious around the ideal of communion.

One can prove to [the bishops] that their duties as citizens, far from being opposed to their duties as ministers, are only reinforced by them; that humanity, religion, and the patrie prescribe for them the same conduct and the same obligations to protect their poor oppressed brothers rather than to hound them away. (CC, to Jean Foulquier, 25 December 1764, 3778, xxii:287)

These passages are indicative of Rousseau's general disposition to the problem of otherness. Rousseau's theology, like his theory of language and music, is driven by the ethico-political imperative for communion. Religion must serve communion to be worthy of our reverence. Divisive or dogmatic interpretations are to be avoided. Expansive interpretations are to be embraced, so that individuals are free to discover in God a pathway to an enlarged view of themselves and their relationship to the world. Religion ought to facilitate an expansive relationship with the Spirit, the natural order, and with one's fellows. Julie, the protagonist of Rousseau's epistolary novel, provides an example.

The love of God does not detach her from creatures; it gives her neither harshness nor bitterness. All these attachments produced by the same cause, mutually stimulated become thereby more charming and sweet, and for my part I believe she would be less devout if she less tenderly loved her father, her husband, her children, her cousin, and myself. (NH, ii:590; vi:483)

Julie's faith is to be esteemed because it is tolerant, compassionate, and forgiving. Her ethical vision is large enough, for example, to encompass even her husband's atheism. In this, she stands apart from the dogmatism Rousseau associated with the intellectual, political, and religious establishments of eighteenth-century Europe. It was Julie's capacity to *exister au sein d'un ordre*, like Emile's, the citizen's, and the Walker's, that distinguished her salutary religiosity from the destructive dogmatism Rousseau associated with established religion.

The desire to extend our being, it should be noted, does not always result in a fellowship of republican virtue. It can equally be manifested as domination and inequality, when accompanied by the vain discourses that Rousseau associated with modern society.²⁵

The recuperation of the authentic communion of the state of nature in modern society means confronting the prevalence of inflamed *amour propre*.

One possibility is to withdraw from society, to lead a primarily private life, in which one pursues communion in relationship with nature, intimates, and with God. The other possibility is a radically public one, by which the subject embraces the energy of *amour propre* instead of trying to resist it. Although *amour propre* generally manifests as the antithesis of *amour de soi* in society, it is potentially an extension of it in a well-ordered polity. This becomes a possibility when love of oneself is derived from one's membership in a larger order, rather than from a specific preference for oneself as distinct from a larger order.

In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau describes how communion might ideally manifest itself in social life. In this essay, which is a detailed critique of the role that the theatre had played in the corruption of European morals, Rousseau once again recalls the immediacy of ancient communion, this time as an aspirational ideal:

Let us not adopt these exclusive Entertainments which close up a small number of people in melancholy fashion in a gloomy cavern, which kept them fearful and immobile in silence and inaction, which give them only prisons, lances, soldiers, and afflicting images of servitude and inequality to see. No, happy Peoples, these are not your festivals. It is in the open air, under the sky, that you ought to gather and give yourselves to the sweet sentiment of your happiness. . . . Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the Spectators become an Entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united. (LDA, v:115; x:344)

Here, Rousseau envisions the recuperation of the savage's sentiment of existence, now in the context of a simple gathering of like-minded compatriots. In Rousseau's imagined festival, erstwhile passive observers become active participants, integrated rather than detached, their involvement felt rather than intellectualized, as Rousseau had previously said of Southern languages, the savage's sentiment of existence and the civic fellowship of ancient Sparta and Rome.

Until he withdrew from society late in life, Rousseau held that patriotism "alone" among all of the sentiments could overcome the divisions attendant to modern society; patriotism alone, Rousseau wrote in the *Government of Poland*, could "raise men up above themselves." (iii:1019; xi:222) Late in life, however, in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau claimed to have discovered another pathway to communion. And while this pathway—which we might call solitary communion—initially seems to be the opposite of social communion, it too involves the extension of being and the transcendence of one's putative limitations.

III. Communion in Solitude

It was a great irony of Rousseau's life that, having done so much to extol the virtues of political and religious fellowship, he was himself rarely in a position to enjoy either one. After decades spent trying to find a community that would have him (and that he could consider worthy of himself), Rousseau eventually abandoned society and began to think and write about the virtues of solitude. In so doing, however, Rousseau did not abandon his quest to extend his being—his desire to enjoy the ecstasies of communion. When he entered his period of extended exile, Rousseau was initially concerned that he would have no way to extend his being. However, amidst his own solitude, Rousseau discovered that there is an equally sublime path to communion available to those living outside of society. “Fondness for solitude and contemplation arose in my heart along with the expansive and tender feelings made to be its nutriment.” (R, i:1099; viii:90) As was the case in Emile's education, the initial circumscribing of the soul allows for its eventual expansion.

It is perhaps uncontroversial to see communion as the endpoint of Rousseauian republicanism. It would be more provocative, however, to describe the aim of Rousseau's solitary reveries as a “*communion des coeurs*,” as Marcel Raymond has done. Deployed as a description of Rousseau's expressly unsocial nature walks, this claim feels like a provocation. Initially, Rousseau's aim in the *Reveries* would seem antithetical to a “*communion des coeurs*.” His stated purpose there was to attain an entirely self-regarding, self-sufficient state of consciousness—one that ceased to be dependent in any way on recognition from others. However, careful reading of the *Reveries* reveals that Rousseau sought in reverie something analogous to the fellowship of citizens that he so famously celebrated in his political writings. This connection is made explicitly in a letter to Malesherbes, in which Rousseau explained that, even in solitude, he was not alone for long:

My imagination did not leave the earth, adorned this way, deserted for very long. I soon peopled it with beings in accordance with my heart, and driving opinion, prejudices, all factitious passions very far away, into these refuges of nature I transported men worthy of inhabiting them. From them I formed a charming society for myself of which I did not feel myself to be unworthy. (i:1140; v:578)

When not dreaming of a communion of beautiful souls, Rousseau spent much of his final years immersed in communion with nature. In what is generally read as the purest expression of the ecstasy of reverie, Rousseau describes a typical evening spent on the Island of Saint-Pierre:

When evening approached, I would come down from the heights of the Island and gladly go sit in some hidden nook along the beach at

the edge of the lake. There, the noise of the waves and the tossing of the water, captivating my senses and chasing all other disturbance from my soul, plunged it into a delightful reverie in which night would often surprise me without my having noticed it. The ebb and flow of this water and its noise, continual but magnified at intervals, striking my ears and eyes without respite, took the place of the internal movements which reverie extinguished within me and was enough to make me feel my existence with pleasure and without taking the trouble to think. From time to time some weak and short reflection about the instability of things in this world arose, an image brought on by the surface of the water. But soon these weak impressions were erased by the uniformity of the continual movement which lulled me and which, without any active assistance from my soul, held me so fast that, called by the hour and agreed-upon signal, I could not tear myself away without effort. (R, i:1045; viii:45)

Here, Rousseau describes communing with his surroundings, becoming one with the world, feeling his own existence and nature's, simultaneously and immediately. He melts into a perfect communion, reminiscent of the citizen who relinquishes private liberty in order to become part of an indivisible whole. It is this seamless communion that awaits at the end of the various pathways traveled by Rousseau in pursuit of what he believed were the few, simple truths necessary for human happiness. There is a symmetry that unites the communion Rousseau experienced on the Island of Saint-Pierre with the religious communion he enjoyed among his "brothers" in Neuchâtel and the political communion celebrated in the political writings.

Despite finding himself alone at the end of his life, Rousseau continued to believe that "our sweetest existence is relative and collective," and that he himself remained "the most sociable and the most loving of humans." (R, i:995; viii:3 and D, i:813; i:118) In the *Dialogues*, the Rousseau character brings together the *solitaire* and the inhabitants of what he calls the "ideal world," who "following his profound views, reach almost the same goal by the opposite route." (D, i:670; i:10) As a solitary, Rousseau relates, he was never alone for long. He "peopled" his imagination "with beings in accordance with [his] heart." (L^{Mal}, i:1140; v:578) Solitude is not an end in itself; it is a pathway to communion, a kind of last resort when the others have been corrupted. In a letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau writes of a "guest who pesters me," and from whom "I must free myself . . . in order to belong to myself." (L^{Mal}, i:1142; v:580) But this solitude is preparation for a renewed communion with nature and, eventually, with the inhabitants of his populated imagination, out of which Rousseau created for himself a "charming society."²⁶

The greatest happiness for Rousseau lay in a *communion des coeurs*, which, in Rousseau's political writings, most often meant love of the *patrie*.

Reverie was, in part, Rousseau's way of resigning himself to his failure as a citizen—a concession that happiness was no longer possible for him in society—but it was also a new way to commune with the hearts of other human beings. Indeed, it was the human heart that Rousseau believed he had encountered in the midst of his most profound reveries. A communion of hearts, Rousseau came to believe late in life, may be possible only outside of society's corrupting influences. In reverie, "*il n'y a plus de non-moi*," as Bachelard puts it.²⁷ We lose ourselves in communion with our surroundings, just as we do amidst our compatriots. Reverie does what Rousseau says we must do at the beginning of the second *Discourse*—go back in time, toward original goodness. To Malesherbes, Rousseau described the phenomenon:

I acquired a disdain for my century and my contemporaries and, feeling that in their midst I would not find a situation that could satisfy my heart, little by little I detached it from the society of men, and I made myself another one in my imagination which charmed me all the more since I could cultivate it without effort, without risk, and always find it reliable and as I needed it to be. (*LMal*, i:1135; v:575)

Through solitude, Rousseau found the communion of hearts that had eluded him in society—a communion with human beings, not as they were in decadent Europe, but as God intended them to be.²⁸

Reverie and patriotism, it turns out, are opposite paths to the same basic truth of human happiness. In *Emile*, Rousseau famously wrote that one must choose between making a man and a citizen because it is not possible to "make both at the same time." (iv:248; xiii:163) Rousseau shows that, whichever choice one makes, the fundamental task will be the same: an initial inward turn, followed by a return to the world, no longer to master it or distinguish oneself in it, but to order oneself in relation to it. Patriotism or social communion draws on *amour propre* to generalize love of oneself, such that citizens serve those interests they share with their fellow citizens. Reverie or solitary communion draws on *amour de soi* such that we rediscover the cosmopolitan love of existence that unites all human beings. The two paths to communion come together in *Emile*, in which Rousseau demonstrates how a child can be raised for either one or for both. Emile will be capable of ordering his soul to a larger order, whether he is alone or in society.

IV. *Emile* and the Solitary/Citizen Binary

Rousseau dedicated *Emile*, by far his most elaborate theoretical work, to demonstrating how the savage's instinctive communion could be preserved through proper education and socialization. Achieving this transformation in modern society is quite a challenge, given the pervasiveness of inequality and moral corruption. The simple, undifferentiated, unmediated love of self that

is inherent to our nature must be transformed into a moral will that expands outward to include a love of others. Rousseau lays out the problem as follows:

If your pupil be alone you have nothing to do. But everything surrounding him influences his imagination. The torrent of prejudices carries him away. To restrain him, he must be pushed in the opposite direction.
(*E*, iv:500; xiii:370)

Absent social influences, the tutor's job would be simple. In fact, absent social influences, the tutor would become entirely superfluous, as Emile's unmediated *amour de soi* would be sufficient to his happiness. Given that a state of perfect solitude is impossible for Emile, as it is for every one of us, the tutor's job (and, by implication, all of ours as well) becomes quite onerous. He must refine his pupil's simple, undifferentiated, unmediated love of self so that it is transformed into a moral will.

The tutor begins to transition Emile from his highly circumscribed, insular, early upbringing to a more social existence as the text moves from Book III to Book IV. This moment in Rousseau's narrative offers especially useful insight into the distinction between solitary and social communion. Prior to Book IV, the tutor has directed Emile's inclination to extend his being exclusively toward the physical world. His education has been highly circumscribed, such that he "considers himself without regard to others . . . demands nothing of anyone and believes he owes nothing to anyone." (*E*, iv:488; xiii:359) Emile "counts on himself alone," because, Rousseau argues, that is appropriate to his age. Communion with nature is the only kind of communion attainable to a child of 15. (*E*, iv:488; xiii:359) His desires remain proportionate to his capacities, and his circumscribed world is sufficient to his needs. "Without troubling the repose of anyone he has lived satisfied, happy, and free insofar as nature has permitted." (*E*, iv:488; xiii:359) *Amour propre*, the passion that will be the basis for both political communion and political division, is "still hardly aroused in him," because he is not yet prepared to deploy it toward a salutary communion of souls. (*E*, iv:488, xiii:352) However, precisely because Emile has not been exposed to social ills in his pre- and early-adolescent upbringing, when he does enter into social relations, he is in a position to effectively combat them.

Emile's education through Book III has taught him how to find happiness in communion with nature. In Book IV, the tutor begins to instruct Emile as to how he might expand his affection to include, first, his fellow human beings and, eventually, the whole of the human race. In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau describes the process as follows:

Positive sensitivity is directly derived from love of oneself. It is very natural that a person who loves himself should seek to extend his being and his enjoyments and to appropriate for himself through attachment what he feels should be a good thing for him. (i:805; i:112)

To exist in relation to something larger than oneself, *au sein d'un ordre*—is the preoccupation of human consciousness, whether in the state of nature or in society. This movement—first inward toward *amour de soi* and then outward toward communion with others—is characteristic of Rousseau's various solutions to the predicament of civilized men and women. An inward turn, which was immediate for the savage but has become complicated for us, is followed by an outward turn toward nature, God, and/or one's compatriots. Rousseau's independence, in other words, is never isolation; it is always a means to communion of one kind or another.

For Emile, the expansion of affection is made possible by the circumscribed nature of his early education, by, as Rousseau puts it, “the experience which concentrates the wishes of a great soul within the narrow limit of the possible.” (*E*, iv:548; xiii:410) The tutor refrains from teaching Emile to “generalize his ideas”—not because general ideas are bad in and of themselves, but because truly authentic, heartfelt generality is attained only by building on the immediacy of particular experience. And so Emile’s education is grounded in experience and sentiment, which are immediate, rather than in reason and abstraction, which are too mediated to inspire virtue. The constraints of Emile’s early upbringing will protect him from the vices that would otherwise influence his entry into society, when it ceases to be an option to keep him out of society any longer.

Around the age of 15, Rousseau writes, one “begins to take an interest in those surrounding us; one begins to feel that one is not made to live alone.” (*E*, iv:502; xiii:371) As we open our hearts to the possibility of human affection, we are initially guided by pity, the first relative sentiment. The tutor must make sure that Emile’s pity is extended to the proper objects, such that the “expansive force of the heart can act.” (*E*, iv:506; xiii:374) This means exposing Emile to other beings, while keeping him from those objects of affection that “contract and concentrate the heart,” to “excite in him goodness, humanity, commiseration, beneficence, and all the attractive and sweet passions . . . and to prevent the birth of envy, covetousness, hate, and all the repulsive and cruel passions.” (*E*, iv:506; xiii:375) Emile is shielded from anything that might cause him to see himself as special or distinct from his fellow human beings, from anything that would “force [him] to compare [himself] with others,” because this leads inevitably toward inflamed *amour propre* rather than communion. (*E*, iv:510; xiii:378)

To achieve this end, the tutor runs Emile through a series of exercises designed to make him realize that he is no wiser than others. It is critical that Emile see himself in others and find himself among them. To believe oneself superior, to take pride in one’s talents or wisdom, is to become detached from one’s fellows. When we fail to see ourselves in others and instead judge others as against ourselves, we come to despise those whom we regard as inferior and to envy those whom we deem superior. When we esteem ourselves above others, we will very quickly come to believe ourselves worthier of happiness than they. But, when the soul’s desire for communion can be

privileged over the temptations of vanity, then justice, morality, and true fellowship become possible.

. . . when the strength of an expansive soul makes me identify myself with my fellow, and I feel that I am, so to speak, in him, it is in order not to suffer that I do not want him to suffer. I am interested in him for love of myself, and the reason for the precept is in nature itself, which inspires in me the desire of my well-being in whatever place I feel my existence. (*E*, iv:523; xiii:389)

Emile's entry into society will inevitably be accompanied by the birth of *amour propre* in his soul. This is unavoidable and not necessarily bad, so long as his *amour propre* is built on qualities shared among his fellow human beings, rather than on those things that he perceives to be special or distinct about himself. "Let us extend *amour propre* to other beings. We shall transform it into a virtue, and there is no man's heart in which this virtue does not have its root." (*E*, iv:547; xiii:409) *Emile* finds happiness not in distinguishing himself or imposing his will but in ordering himself to his surroundings. (*E*, iv:602; xiii:455)²⁹

V. Beyond the Solitary/Citizen Binary

Emile complicates the solitary/citizen binary because, in it, Rousseau proposes that *Emile* could be at home either in society with his compatriots or on his own, outside of society. In society, he will find ways of communing with his compatriots; left to himself, he will commune with God and nature. *Emile* will be at home in either context because he is "raised for independence," as David Gauthier puts it.³⁰ Just as the savage's capacity for unmediated communion was a function of his radical independence, so too do our mediated pathways to communion require independence. For this reason, "the worst that can happen to one," as Rousseau put it in the second *Discourse*, "is to see himself at the discretion of the other." (*DI*, iii:181; iii:56) It would be a mistake, however, to interpret *Emile's* independence as the terminal goal of his education (which may account for Kautz's equivocal "sometimes"). Independence is the proximate, not the terminal, goal of *Emile's* education. It is the quality that will allow him to be happy, either on his own or in the context of a family and a *patria*. But independence is itself a prerequisite to communion, or the extension of being. *Emile's* independence is so critical, because it enables the possibility of all kinds of communion. If *Emile* were to find himself in a republic, he would enjoy the pleasures of political communion; if, on the other hand, he were to find himself in a corrupt society, he would content himself with the pleasures of communion with God and nature.

This reading of *Emile* suggests an alternative to the solitary/citizen binary—the hermeneutic through which Rousseau has so often been read. Arthur Melzer, though nowhere near alone, is one the best exponents of the view

that Rousseau articulated, as Melzer puts it, a “radical new kind of individualism, not merely political but, as it were, ontological.”³¹ Melzer’s reading leads him to a series of dichotomies—between, for instance, private and public, sentimental and rational, spontaneous and moral—which he attributes to Rousseau.³² What these dichotomies obscure is the congruity between what Melzer calls “individualism” and communion. Melzer is not wrong to emphasize the importance of individualism. However, individualism was important to Rousseau not only as an end in itself but also for the sake of communion. In fact, the “sentiment of existence,” Rousseau’s term for the savage’s unmediated connection to his surroundings, is not “completely internal,” as Melzer claims, but simultaneously internal and external; it is the erasure of the boundary between self and other, or self and God, or self and nature. It is the most intimate *connection* to the world. Melzer’s reading of the sentiment of existence leads him to the questionable conclusion that “my true self is not what I have in common but what is particular to myself.”³³ This formulation presupposes too strict a distinction between what is particular to ourselves and what we have in common with others. For Rousseau, when we discover our “true self,” as Melzer calls it, the very distinction between self and other is blurred. As Rousseau himself put it, “our sweetest existence is relative and collective, and our true *self* is not entirely within us.” (i:813; i:118) Melzer, Gourevitch, Gauthier, Kautz, and the rest are right to emphasize the importance of individualism, but they are wrong insofar as they suggest that Rousseauian individualism comes at the expense of communion. The inward turn is the condition for communion, not its antithesis, as Melzer himself, writing elsewhere, seems to understand:

When, withdrawing within, I discover my true, private self, it also becomes possible to discover and “identify with” theirs, to connect inside to inside, to be witness to the intense, trembling reality that another’s life has for him, and in this way to excite and heighten the experience of my own life, to make my existence more real to me. To the extent, then, that the Rousseauian self seeks to connect to some larger reality, it is to the inner flow of human life and suffering. Rousseau, one might say, replaces classical contemplation with a caring voyeurism. And once again, sincerity, both one’s own and others’, is the essential *condition* of this experience.³⁴

Rousseau’s ethic of independence is part of a double movement, in which detaching oneself from the external world is always followed by communion with it. The circumstance of being true to oneself is followed always by the extension of oneself—the disintegration of a pure interiority and the integration or communion of inner and outer, whether in republican citizenship, a rural household, Christian worship, or reverie. The inward turn is made necessary by modern corruption but is not an end itself. It is rather a precondition for a return to the world.

This point is obscured by Rousseau's persistent advice to cut oneself off from social influences, to "circumscribe oneself" (*se circonscrire*), as he puts it in the *Reveries*. Rousseau's ultimate aim was communion, but his immediate advice was often to turn radically inward. There are many passages in which Rousseau describes a desire to detach the soul from the body, reminiscent of Socrates's valorization of the intelligible world. For example:

I aspire to the moment where, delivered from the shackles of the body, I will be me without contradiction or division and shall need only myself in order to be happy. (*E*, iv:604–5; xiii:457)³⁵

Gouhier infers that these passages reflect a desire for a "radical independence."³⁶ Perhaps, but Rousseau's desire for independence is not for independence *tout court*; it is rather for independence from the appetites that inhibit communion, whether those appetites be physiological or social, and whether that communion be solitary or collective. Rousseau's desire to be "self-sufficient like God," to which Gouhier also refers in this context was obviously a will toward independence, but independence was itself valuable for Rousseau as a precondition for an authentic *communion des coeurs*. (*R*, i:1047; viii:46) In order to expand one's affections, it is necessary first to turn inward. There one finds the basis for an authentic communion, as opposed to a superficial or exploitative social bond based on inflamed *amour propre*.

Rousseau believed both that communion is the key to human happiness and that, as Sartre would later say, "Hell is other people." He participated in a tradition of vehement social criticism, which is accompanied by an equally vehement desire for society—the deeper the critique of the status quo, the greater the transformative impulse. For Rousseau, the depth of corruption in modern society meant that the goal of communion would be reached only through an initial inward turn, away from others, so that one might then return to them disposed to see them as brothers and sisters rather than as adversaries. That may not happen at the socio-political level, and so it may become a private, spiritual exercise, but the desire to extend our being remains constant throughout Rousseau's writings.

Rousseau's philosophy is often read as bipolar, exalting alternately the solitary and the citizen. I have tried to make the case that these two poles are closer to one another than one might think—one image is the inverse of the other. The solitary life of the Walker is not an anti-political life. In fact, like Emile's education, it is designed to recuperate the *communion des coeurs* that has been nullified by the debasement of *civisme* in modern societies. When just and ennobled, a political life is the surest path to happiness; when debased, a political life cannot be a happy one. It was the fellowship of compatriots that Rousseau found so compelling about a virtuous republic, and only this

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fellowship that could make politics preferable to solitude. Without it, Rousseau opted for pleasures of a private life over the vanities of a social one.

The need for communion was, for Rousseau, the one irreducible truth of human existence, whether in the state of nature, in society, or in solitude. Rousseau pursued it himself, not only in his writings but in his private life as well, as he wrote in the *Confessions*.

The first of my needs, the greatest, the strongest, the most inextinguishable, was entirely in my heart: it was the need for an intimate society and as intimate as it could be. . . . This peculiar need was such that the closest union of bodies could not even be enough for it: I would have needed two souls in the same body. . . . (i:414; v:348)

Toward the end of his life when he was “forced to abstain from thinking,” there was one thing Rousseau claimed he was unable to give up, because, as he wrote in the *Reveries*, “in spite of my efforts, my expansive soul seeks to extend its feeling and existence to other beings.” (i:1066; viii:62) It is often seen as ironic that someone who was so eloquent about the need to connect to other beings wrote of discovering happiness only in exile from them. If my argument in this chapter has been at all convincing, this dynamic should be regarded with no less interest but with a good deal less irony. Rousseau, who is widely regarded as having produced one of the earliest and best accounts of the tension between individualism and collectivism in the development of modern subjectivity, has also, it turns out, produced one of the earliest and best accounts of how that tension might be resolved.

Notes

- 1 Victor Gourevitch, “Introduction” to trans. Gourevitch, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 2 Steven Kautz, “Privacy and Community,” in Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcoff eds., *The Legacy of Rousseau* (University of Chicago Press, 1997) 251.
- 3 Frank E. Manuel, “A Dream of Eupsychia,” *Daedalus* 107:3 (Summer 1978) 1–12.
- 4 Pierre Burgevin, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la religion de Genève* (Geneva: Edition Labor et Fides, 1962) 31.
- 5 Jean Starobinski regards Rousseau’s desire for unity as a failure confront the “Other.” Rousseau, on Starobinski’s reading, does not account for the many ways in which difference obstructs unity. He sees Sartrean “bad faith” in Rousseau’s refusal, for example, to accept the Otherness of language (*Transparency and Obstruction*, xxv). Starobinski’s critique is compelling as a diagnosis of Rousseau’s psychology. My interest, however, is more in specifying the role played by communion in Rousseau’s system than in pinpointing the socio-historical or psychological origins of the Rousseau’s commitment to communion.
- 6 Laurence Cooper, “Between Eros and Will to Power: Rousseau and ‘The Desire to Extend Our Being’,” *American Political Science Review* 98 (2004) 105. Elizabeth Rose Wingrove’s reading of Rousseau on the constitution of subjectivity

challenges the solitary/citizen binary from a somewhat different perspective. Wingrove identifies a particular conception of consent as simultaneously structuring personal and political identity. (*Rousseau's Republican Romance*, 13) This can also be seen in political readings of *Julie*, such as Rebecca Kukla's "Coupling of Human Souls: Rousseau and the Problem of Gender Relations," in Lynda Lange ed., *Feminist Rereadings of Rousseau* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) 346–82.

- 7 Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power," 105.
- 8 Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, 178.
- 9 Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power," 106.
- 10 Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power," 105.
- 11 Cooper, "Between Eros and Will to Power," 105.
- 12 Rousseau's love of botany, and his corresponding disdain for pharmacology, provides a good illustration of how existence or being must be extended in order to be sublime. Rousseau was drawn to botany, not as a branch of medicine, but as an end in itself—a pleasant way of existing in nature. Rousseau distinguished botany from pharmacology, which situates the practitioner as a foreign presence, looking to understand plants only insofar as that understanding facilitates their exploitation. Rousseau valued botany because, as he understood it, it facilitates communion with nature. Pharmacology, by contrast, punctures or disrupts that state of balance or communion, throwing consciousness back on itself through the introduction of self-interest. To be immersed in, merge with, commune with, nature, God, or one's fellows—this is "feeling the activity of one's soul." See Kelly, *Rousseau as Author*, 178, referencing *DI*, iii:164; iii:43.
- 13 Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 20.
- 14 "Every attachment is a sign of insufficiency. If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them. Thus from our very infirmity is born our frail happiness. A truly happy being is a solitary being. God alone enjoys an absolute happiness. But who among us has the idea of it? If some imperfect being could suffice unto himself, what would he enjoy according to us? He would be alone; he would be miserable." (*E*, iv:503; xiii:372)
- 15 Starobinski, "Rousseau and Eloquence," in R. A. Leigh ed., *Rousseau after 200 Years: Proceedings of the Cambridge Bicentennial Colloquium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 204.
- 16 See *DI*, iii:193; iii:66–7.
- 17 The subtitle to the *Essay on the Origin of Languages* is "In which melody and musical imitation are treated."
- 18 Communion seems also to be the purpose of reading or at least the best reason for doing so. In the *Dialogues*, the Rousseau character describes the experience of reading "the books of J.J. . . . : I recognized in his writings the man I found in myself, and meditating on them taught me to find within myself the enjoyment and happiness that all others seek so far from themselves." (i:728; i:52–3)
- 19 See, for example, *On the Principle of Melody*, v:343; vii:270. Singing—the fusion of language and music—was, as Leo Damrosch has put it, "the truest expression of music's purpose." *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005) 229.
- 20 *Examination of Two Principles Advanced by M. Rameau in His Brochure Entitled: "Errors on Music in the Encyclopedia,"* v:358–9; vii:279.
- 21 In the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau laments that modern music (in contrast to ancient) has become "noisier to the ear and less sweet to the heart." (v:422; vii:327)
- 22 "As a model for democratic community," Julia Simon writes, "the function of the musical ensemble provides a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of democratic group interaction." "Singing Democracy: Music and Politics

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in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66 (2005) 433–54. See also, Tracy Strong, "Music, the Passions, and Political Freedom in Rousseau," in Stanley Hoffmann and Christie McDonald eds., *Rousseau and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 92–110.

- 23 The formula for the enunciation of the general will is given in the *Social Contract*:

Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole. Instantly, in place of the private person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body, composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from the same act its unity, its common self, its life, and its will. (iii:361; iv:139)

Here already, when Rousseau's writing is at its most formal, the appeal of a collective love of the *patrie* reverberates through Rousseau's prose.

- 24 "I said to myself," St. Preux writes of Julie, "peace reigns in the depths of her heart as it does in the sanctuary she has named." (*NH*, ii:487; vi:400) Earlier, in conveying the "secret horror" of St. Preux's experience in Paris, Rousseau described his "beleaguered soul" which "seeks expansion, and everywhere finds itself hemmed in." (*NH*, ii:231; vi:190)

- 25 See, for example, *DAS*, iii:8; ii:6.

- 26 Despite finding himself alone at the end of his life, Rousseau continued to believe that "our sweetest existence is relative and collective," and that he himself remained "the most sociable and the most loving of humans." (*R*, i:995; viii:3 and *D*, i:118; i:813). In the *Confessions*, Rousseau revealed, "To be loved by everyone who approached me was my keenest desire." (i:14; v:12)

- 27 Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de la rêverie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960) 144.

- 28 In general, he could not find them among his contemporaries and so was forced to constitute them in his imagination. One exception was the neighborhood children Rousseau describes encountering in the ninth Walk: "Oh! If I still had a few moments of pure affection which comes from the heart, were it only from a child still in a romper; if I could still see in some eyes the joy and contentment of being with me which I used to see so often or of which I would at least be the cause, for how many ills and sorrows would these short but sweet effusions of my heart not compensate me?" (*R*, i:1089; viii:81) This passage is a clear illustration of what Masson described as "the mystical projection of the essential needs of his soul." Rousseau used these inchoate opportunities at intersubjective communion to project his idea of original goodness onto those with which he imagined himself to be in communion.

- 29 "I see nothing which is not ordered according to the same system and does not contribute to the same end—namely, the preservation of the whole in its established order." (*E*, iv:581; xiii:437–8)

- 30 David Gauthier, *The Sentiment of Existence* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) 33.

- 31 Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 42.

- 32 Melzer, "Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity," in Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarlov eds., *The Legacy of Rousseau* (University of Chicago Press, 1997) 291. Paul de Man argues that Rousseau is hopelessly confused about the inner/outer problem. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 241. Truth is found within, yet virtue is associating with others. De Man does not think it possible to render these claims consistent. But, if we situate this distinction in the context of *amour propre*, we can see both the inward turn and the expansion of affection

as a refusal of inflamed *amour propre*. The affirmation of natural goodness *via* the inward turn becomes the basis for a newfound *communion des coeurs*. In other words, the truth we discover when we consult our heart is the importance of communion. The texts de Man emphasizes—the *Profession*, *Julie* and “Du bonheur public”—all point to the idea that happiness is relational—a relationship between oneself and nature or oneself and one’s fellows. De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 253.

- 33 Melzer, “Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity,” 290.
- 34 Melzer, “Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity,” 291. (italics added)
- 35 Rousseau expresses a similar desire in the *Reveries* and *Confessions*.
- 36 Gouhier, *Les Méditations Métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 177.

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He does not know what routine, custom, or habit is. What he did yesterday does not influence what he does today. He never follows a formula, does not give way before authority or example, and acts and speaks only as it suits him. So do not expect from him dictated speeches or studied manners, but always the faithful expression of his ideas and the conduct born of his inclinations.

(*E*, iv:421; xiii:304)

Rousseau's ethics of truthseeking can be summarized as utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity in pursuit of communion. As we saw in the previous chapter, the joy of communion—whether with nature, God, or one's fellows—is the truth that Rousseau most closely associates with human happiness. In this chapter, I will describe the practice or ethics that leads the truthseeker—whether by way of reverie, republicanism, religion, or reason—to communion.

Rousseau's philosophy of truth was distinct for its time in the same way the whole of his thought was—in its emphasis on feeling over reason, the heart over the mind, the simple over the sophisticated, the useful over the demonstrable, the personal over the systematic. For Rousseau, truth was less a function of reflection than of character, less a function of learning than of what Rousseau refers to in the epigraph to this chapter as the “faithful expression” of one's ideas and inclinations. This character trait, which we might usefully call “sincerity,” has long been regarded by Rousseau's readers as central to his philosophical system.¹

I. Truth and Sincerity

As many have noted, Rousseau cherished sincerity above skill, knowledge, and expertise. This is made clear by, among other things, the nature and depth of Rousseau's admiration for his two great philosophical heroes, Socrates and Fénelon, whom he praised far more for their sincere devotion to truth than for any specific philosophical achievement or argument.

To love the truth—to seek the truth whatever the cost—was, for Rousseau, the most important prerequisite for its acquisition.

If we can grasp Rousseau's ethics of truthseeking, therefore, we will also have gone a long way toward understanding Rousseau's teaching on sincerity. For this reason, it is worth clarifying a few points about the relationship between truth and sincerity in Rousseau's system. Rousseau's criteria for truth claims—utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity—all privilege what he called the “*sentiment intérieur*” over the abstract principles and formulas usually associated with philosophy. Mandates to listen to one's heart appear repeatedly in Rousseau's *corpus*.² Rousseauian sincerity is self-regarding, perhaps even selfish, but selfishness is not always a bad thing as Rousseau understood it. The invocation of others was, for him, so often a subterfuge, while an authentic inward turn could be restorative. Moreover, a real concern for the welfare of others must begin with this kind of an inward turn. There is a self-regarding, even narcissistic, foundation to Rousseau's philosophy, but it is an innocent narcissism, in Rousseau's view, which is the only alternative to the vain narcissism that corrupts modern society—the difference, between the narcissism of *amour de soi* and the narcissism of *amour propre*. The former is the basis for an expansive love of self in conjunction with nature, God, or one's fellows, while the latter is necessarily love of self at the expense of others.

Arthur Melzer, in an essay on Rousseau and sincerity, goes so far as to suggest that Rousseau believed sincerity in the pursuit of truth to be more important than truth itself—that it is more important, in other words, to *try* to find the truth than to actually find it.³ In detaching sincerity from truth, Melzer raises the discomfiting prospect of being sincere and yet, at the same time, entirely wrong. (As Luther Ingram put it in the 1970s, “If loving you is wrong, I don't want to be right.”) Now, if one accepts this splitting off of sincerity from truth, an obvious objection presents itself—namely that it is possible to be simultaneously sincere and wrong. It is possible, in other words, to faithfully and sincerely believe oneself to be speaking the truth while having in actuality fallen into error. For Melzer, Rousseau's willingness to walk headlong into this dilemma is evidence that he valued sincerity above truth—that Rousseau was, as Melzer puts it, “replacing truth with sincerity.”⁴ But Melzer's conclusion is not the only available way of reconciling Rousseau's dual commitment to truth and sincerity. What if sincerity, rather than a substitute for truth, is itself our most reliable avenue to the truth? What if Rousseau regarded sincerity not as an alternative to truth but as the condition for it? What if loving the truth is the surest guarantee of finding it? We might, in other words, refuse Melzer's severing of truth from sincerity. Although it is no doubt possible to be sincere and nevertheless to find oneself in error, sincerity, we shall see, was not an alternative to truth in Rousseau's view. It was, in fact, the best and, as it turns out, the only path to truth itself. Rousseau respected sincerity, in other words, not only as an end in itself but also because he believed dedication to the truth to be a necessary prerequisite to the possession of it.

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It is important that we not read Rousseau's emphasis on interiority and the *sentiment intérieur* as a refusal of an objective, external order. While Rousseau radicalized what Charles Taylor has called "the subjectivism of modern moral understanding," he did not go so far as to sever the *sentiment intérieur* from an external, "providential order."⁵ Rousseau's retreat into the inner self was a repudiation of society; it was not a metaphysical claim about the nature of truth. Rousseau did not, in other words, sever sincerity from truth. As Taylor puts it, Rousseau "ran his inner voice in tandem with the traditional way of understanding and recognizing universal good."⁶ Rousseau presupposed the availability of truth—the existence of an objective, moral or providential order to which human beings could gain access. His ethic of individualism did not, therefore, go so far as to affirm individual subjectivity *as truth*; it rather affirmed an inward relation to the self as the most reliable avenue to an understanding of the objective and universal truths of human happiness.

Sincerity, then, is a necessary condition for accessing truth. It is not, however, in and of itself, guaranteed to lead one to the truth. Here, Alessandro Ferrara's distinction between sincerity and authenticity is useful. Ferrara introduces the term "authenticity" to address the fact that is possible to sincerely subscribe to judgments that do not faithfully represent the inner voice or conscience. To be sincere, Ferrara writes, is only to be "true to one's self."⁷ It is possible, for example, to adhere sincerely to social expectations rather than to the demands of one's own conscience or inner voice. This might be sincerity, Ferrara writes, but it is not authenticity. To be sincere, for Rousseau, is to be true to our inner voice, as opposed to, for example, the competing voice of *amour propre* or the desire for public esteem. Ferrara calls this "authenticity" or "sincerity for its own sake." It is following our feelings "in the absence of any attempt to shape our feelings."⁸ Sincerity, for Rousseau, was more than being "true to one's self;" it was being true to the *sentiment intérieur*—the innate goodness of which Rousseau took as his fundamental principle. Sincerity, then, is the faithful expression of one's *authentic* feelings.⁹

This chapter maps the component parts of Rousseau's ethics of truth-seeking, and, in so doing, it operates also as an exegesis of Rousseauean sincerity. Together, utility, immediacy, autonomy, and simplicity define what it means to be "upright and sincere," as Rousseau put it in an essay on the character of a good author. (*Idea of Method in the Composition of a Book*, ii:1243; xii:239)

II. Rousseau's Ethics of Truthseeking

i. Utility

Rousseau attributed the start of his literary career to an epiphany he experienced on the road to Vincennes. What he did not explain, perhaps could

not explain, is why, of all things, the Academy's particular question—"Has the rise of the arts and sciences contributed to the purification of morals?"—struck him so powerfully. What was it about the question that set his mind in motion? Why would someone with ostensibly no literary ambitions do an about face upon seeing this posting?¹⁰ The first sentence of the essay Rousseau wrote in response to the question provides a plausible answer.

Here is one of the greatest and finest questions ever debated. This discourse is not concerned with those metaphysical subtleties that have prevailed in all parts of literature and from which the announcements of academic competitions are not always exempt; rather, it is concerned with one of those truths that pertain to human happiness. (*DAS*, iii:6; ii:3)

Rousseau was uninterested in purely abstract questions (or at least he professed to be), but he was extremely interested in the utility (of lack thereof) of abstract thinking. The Academy's question appealed to Rousseau because it was framed in practical rather than theoretical terms and, as such, Rousseau sensed in it the opportunity to articulate the nature of his instinctive resistance to Europe's self-congratulatory attitude toward the rise of the arts and sciences.

The Academy's question met Rousseau's austere threshold for taking pen to paper, because it pertains to the only thing that really matters—the truths that affect human happiness. The supremacy of human happiness remained the object of Rousseau's inquiries all the way through the end of his life. For Rousseau, this translated into an emphasis on the utility of ideas, though he understood "utility" in its ordinary sense, not in the formal, utilitarian sense in which discrete units of human happiness are quantified and then aggregated. Rousseau's emphasis on utility meant only that ideas ought to be evaluated based on the extent to which they serve essential needs. He did not argue that morality or justice ought to be determined by aggregate happiness. Rousseau invoked utility as an alternative to the more rarefied, formal criteria he associated with eighteenth-century European philosophy.

In a letter to Deschamps, Rousseau differentiated the kind of ideas he was interested in (the kind, by implication, that the rest of us should be interested in) from the kind that he was not interested in and that we, he clearly meant to suggest, should also avoid:

The truth that I love is not so much metaphysical as moral; I love truth because I hate lies, and I could only be untrue when I am of bad faith. I would love metaphysical truth, if I believed that it lay within our purview; but I have only ever seen it in books, and, without hope of ever discovering it there, I disdain its instruction, persuaded that the truth that is useful to us is closer to us and that acquiring it does not require a great scientific apparatus. (*CC*, to Deschamps, 25 June 1761, ix:28)¹¹

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There is much to know but not much that we *need* to know. Rousseau elaborates in *Emile*:

Of the fields of learning that are available to us, some are false, others are useless, others serve to feed the pride of the man who possesses them. The small number of those which really contribute to our well-being is alone worthy of the researches of a wise man and, consequently, of a child whom one wants to make wise. It is a question not of knowing what is but only of knowing what is useful. (*E*, iv:428; xiii:310)

The only truths worth pursuing—the only truths that can justifiably be called truths at all—are those that contribute to happiness. Correspondingly, Rousseau introduced many of his works with an appeal to their utility. The *Profession* was, for example, the “most useful writing of the century,” and, in the *Social Contract*, he vowed to reconcile “justice and utility.” (*LB*, iv:960; ix:46–47, *SC*, iii:352; iv:131)¹² The beginning of *Perpetual Peace* makes reference to utility (iii:592; xi:53), and the second *Discourse* begins by justifying its topic as “the most useful and least advanced of all human knowledge.” (iii:122; iii:12) To Jean Ribotte, Rousseau wrote, “each person on earth has his vocation.” Rousseau’s vocation, he continued, was to “tell the public difficult but useful truths.” (*CC*, to Jean Ribotte, 24 October 1761, 1521, ix:201)

Very early on, Rousseau wrote, in a letter to his father, of a self-designed “system of study” in which he sought “useful and agreeable knowledge.” (*CC*, to Isaac Rousseau, end of autumn, 1735, i:31) Much later in life, Rousseau decided that this was not only *his* motivation for beginning a system of study, but also the *only* defensible motivation for any system of study. The only justification for inquiry, Rousseau believed, was to meet a pressing, authentic, personal need, not to “speak knowingly . . . , do a book,” or even “instruct others.” Rousseau claimed that he never set out to teach, an impulse he regarded as a sign of corruption. (*R*, i:1013; viii:18) Teachers are more interested in appearing educated than they are in educating. Rousseau vowed to seek *only* those truths that interested him, only those truths that, as the vicar put it, “it matters for me to know.” (*E*, iv:592; xiii:447)¹³

Rousseau’s approach to truth was pragmatic. He judged ideas, feelings, and sentiments based on their utility. For example, he embraced belief in an afterlife, not based on a doctrinal reading of scripture, but rather because, as he put it, “I have suffered too much in this life not to expect another one.” (*LV*, iv: 1075; iii:121) Rousseau defended his preference for Pope’s optimism over Voltaire’s pessimism in similar terms:

This optimism that you find so cruel, nevertheless consoles me in the very miseries that you depict to me as intolerable. Pope’s poem sweetens my troubles and leads me to patience; yours embitters my pains, invites me to grumbling, and depriving me of everything beyond a troubled hope, it reduces me to despair. (*LV*, iv:1060; iii:109)

Rousseau was not primarily interested in whether the human condition “really is” as either Pope or Voltaire describe it. His overriding concern was for the effect that subscribing to either one has on happiness. Rousseau was heartened by Pope’s optimism; if happiness is natural to us, then our miseries are artificial and can theoretically be overcome. This belief is useful for us, and its utility seems to be Rousseau’s rationale for embracing it.

Utility was, for Rousseau, not only a guide to which truths we ought to pursue but a standard for truth itself. It was, in other words, not just a practical guide to what we ought to think about, but an essential quality of truth. Rousseau was not especially interested in whether one could make a logical case for one argument or another. He regarded logical coherence as a necessary standard of validity, but far from a sufficient one. Ideas are to be evaluated based less on their logical consistency than on the extent to which they serve human happiness. On many occasions, Rousseau rejected theoretically plausible claims on this basis, admitting that he could not refute them logically, but insisting nevertheless that one ought not accept them as true.¹⁴ Some errors are paradoxically truer than are some ostensible truths.

For Rousseau, it was an idea’s tendency to support social life that determined its truth. Truth, detached from circumstances, is not truth but “metaphysics,” a mainly pernicious exercise that threatens to undermine the truths that make for happiness. The discussion of lies in the fourth Walk of the *Reveries* clarifies this point. It is amidst his discussion of Marion in the *Reveries* that Rousseau fleshes out in a systematic way his understanding of the nature and value of truth.¹⁵ Rousseau makes clear that putative truths must be useful in order to qualify as true. Utility is the standard by which truth is measured, so much so that lying can be permissible if it is useful. Truth stripped of every kind of possible usefulness cannot therefore be a thing owed, and consequently she who suppresses it or disguises it does not lie at all. (*R*, i:1027; viii:30)¹⁶ Utility supersedes even intent in Rousseau’s calculus:

. . . to make a lie innocent it is not enough that there be no express intent to harm; there must, in addition, be certainty that the error into which those spoken to are thrown can harm neither them nor anyone in any way whatever. (*R*, i:1029; viii:32)

Here, it has become possible to tell true lies (factual lies which serve truth and justice). In the fourth Walk, Rousseau distinguishes between “general and abstract truth” and “particular and individual truth.” (*R*, i:1026; viii:29–30) The former Rousseau refers to as “the most precious of all goods,” while the latter may be contravened, as in fictions or fables, as long as doing so serves “general and abstract truth.” Rousseau admits in the *Reveries* that he himself tells factual lies in order to convey his honesty, but he insists that he always tells the factual truth when doing so runs counter to self-interest. (*R*, i:1032; viii:34) Rousseau, therefore, tells factual lies where

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no ill can come of it and when the lies make clear the truth that Rousseau is an honest man, in the way that really matters.

Utterances that correspond to the facts but make human beings worse are less truthful than utterances that misrepresent the facts while making us better. The former Rousseau calls a “lie,” while the latter is a “fiction,” akin to a work of fiction, which contrives a set of facts to evoke a deeper truth. (*R*, i:1029; viii:32) It is permissible, Rousseau thought, to tamper with factual truth (“truth of the facts”) if it serves “moral truth.” (*R*, i:1033; viii: 35) Conversely, there is an obligation to share any and all knowledge that serves human happiness. “The obligation to speak the truth,” Rousseau wrote, “is founded only in usefulness,” as is the option to suppress or even alter information that is inconsistent with the requirements of human happiness. (*R*, i:1028; viii:31) For Rousseau, an actual lie occurs not when we knowingly deceive, but when we knowingly deceive *while* suspecting that the consequences of our deception will be harmful. Truth-telling and lying were for Rousseau not what we would ordinarily expect. We must not think of ourselves as truthful, Rousseau writes, just because we “faithfully cite places, times, and persons.” (*R*, i:1031; viii: 33) Rousseau seems to be implicitly establishing a defense of something like Plato’s noble lie. Rousseau values truth only if truth serves justice, which means true lies are possible. Truth then becomes the just mixture of true lies and true facts.

We ought to think about utility as a guide to truth, Rousseau argued, because it is better than the alternative, and it will enter our calculus anyway, regardless of any efforts to the contrary. Rousseau openly politicized or, we might say, ethicized philosophical questions: “What we ought to do depends a lot on what we ought to believe.” (*R*, i:1013; viii:18) Note that Rousseau says neither that we ought to do what we believe nor even that we ought to do what is right. He says rather that what we ought to do is a function of what we *ought* to believe. It is a formulation that begs the question because one immediately wants to ask *why* we ought to believe whatever it is that Rousseau thinks we ought to believe. What is the basis or criterion for what we ought to believe?

Rousseau’s answer to this question was twofold: first, we ought to believe in those truths that serve human happiness, and, second, the philosopher’s insistence on a disjunction between the true and the useful is pernicious. It ends up demeaning principles cherished by happy peoples across the centuries, and it produces moral agents capable of walking past a suffering soul without being affected. In other words, it produces a rarefied, rationalist worldview that detaches one from the sentiments that produce moral action. Now, it must be said that these arguments, however compelling one finds them, do not resolve the ambiguity in Rousseau’s fusion of truth and utility. This is because Rousseau did not set out to resolve this ambiguity. As was generally the case, Rousseau was more comfortable lingering in resonant ambiguities, especially if the alternative implicated him in a formal philosophical discourse.

One implication of Rousseau's yoking of truth to utility is that things we might ordinarily assume to be obviously true turn out to have little or no bearing on truth. Rousseau's fusing of truth and utility yields a distinction between "general" truth, which is to be treasured at all costs and "factual" truths, which are sometimes bad and frequently indifferent. He also introduces the category of "metaphysical" truths, most of which are not susceptible to human beings' finite capacity for understanding. This latter point should not be worrisome, according to Rousseau, because metaphysical truths are of no practical import for us. Only useful truths—those that serve justice—are worth pursuing, and, in some sense, truths are true for Rousseau only if they serve justice. For those who love truth "justice and truth are two synonymous words," and one can take "one for the other indifferently." (*R*, i:1032 viii:34) This love of truth is indifferent to the trivial but insists on "faithfully rendering to each one what is owed." (*R*, i:1032; viii:34)

Philosophy, if it can be defined at all, would seem to rest on some distinction between the expedient and the true, or between interest and reason. Rousseau, however, rejected this distinction, asserting not only that reason and interest cannot be separated, but also that sound reasoners reason on the *basis* of interest, that philosophers' failure to grasp the truth is a consequence of their misplaced desire to detach reason from interest, and that, through this distinction, philosophers have in fact obscured truths apparent to those who have not been tempted by this distinction.

All of this begs yet another question as to whether utility is a defensible basis for ascertaining truth. Is it not possible, for example, that we could be made happy by morally repugnant attitudes or belief systems? Rousseau's answer to this question was, once again, twofold. First, we have no better philosophical standard than utility. It is certainly more reliable than abstract reason, which frequently leads to conclusions destructive of justice and personal happiness. Second, acting on the basis of utility is the best guarantor of moral integrity. This is one implication of Rousseau's first principle: "Nature made man happy and good but society depraves him and makes him miserable." (*D* i:934; i:213) We are born good, which means that anything that authentically serves our happiness (and we will need to unpack this "authentically" in the ensuing sections) cannot be false or immoral.

For Rousseau, what we regard as true cannot be separated from what we ought to believe. And what we ought to believe is a function less of rational understanding than of an inner sense of which principles will be conducive to personal happiness. For example, the vicar rejects skepticism not because it is philosophically problematic but because he "never experienced greater evils . . . as during those times of perplexity and anxiety, when I ceaselessly wandered from doubt to doubt." (*E*, iv:567; xiii:427)¹⁷ Human beings must believe; we have an essential need to believe in justice and the goodness of existence. While ancient philosophers understood this, modern writers, concerned to win renown, produce impenetrable arguments without

regard for their effect on those who will read them. They are unbothered by doubt, atheism, and naysaying, believing only in “their own interests.” (*R*, i:1016; viii:21) These arguments could not persuade Rousseau; they could not move his heart or soul, although they did trouble his mind, which he always believed to be a less reliable arbiter of truth. Rousseau was certain of the error of these arguments, even if he frequently “found no good reply to them.” (*R*, i:1016; viii:21) He tells us that his heart answered better than his reason, assuring him that he was not mistaken, even if he had to concede that he could not refute the logic of his adversaries’ claims.

Rousseau sought knowledge for the only justifiable reason—to know himself in response to his authentic needs. (*R*, i:1013; viii:19) Writing is legitimate if (and only if) prompted by an authentic need. Writers of what Rousseau called the “enchanted world” write only in response to a “stimulus”—a stimulus “stronger than interest and even glory.” (*D*, i:12; i:672–673) Only a great cause can “bring them to take up the pen.” Rousseau’s stimulus was the urgent need to believe, made difficult by the vapid skepticism that he regarded as pervasive in modern society.

Without this great stimulus, would-be writers should remain silent. Ignorance, Rousseau believed, is preferable to error, and so those who seek to enlighten must consider carefully the effect of their arguments. Better to leave people be than to unsettle the foundations of happiness and morality. It is inhumane, Rousseau writes to Voltaire, to trouble “peaceful souls” in the name of some proposition that is “neither certain nor useful.” (*LV*, i:1072; iv:118–9) Rousseau saved his rare praise for philosophers for those like Socrates and the Abbé Saint-Pierre, who he believed had deployed reason for the sake of human happiness and in service to it. It was less what they wrote than what they wrote about that impressed Rousseau. Philosophical virtue lies not only in thinking well but in thinking well *about the right things*. We are not culpable for reasoning badly, but we are culpable for reasoning maliciously. We have limited control over the cleverness or profundity of our thinking, but we have substantial control over what we think about. Rousseau was most adamant about that for which reason is to be deployed. This mattered to him more than the substance or form of reason.

At this point, we have the beginnings of a criterion for an ethics of truthseeking. We have a sense of the Rousseauean truthseekers’ abiding ambition—communion, whether it be with nature, God, or her fellow human beings—and we have some understanding of the cognitive pathway that leads one there. In the state of nature or even in ancient Sparta, this would be a sufficient account. The savage and the Spartan could simply seek their utility, and either original goodness or love of the *polis* would do the rest, enabling their seamless communion with their surroundings. However, in the context of modern society, with its attendant inequality and *amour propre*, utility alone is an insufficient guide to truthseeking. Now we must be able to distinguish our authentic needs from our artificial ones,

between those vain ideas that inflame *amour propre* and those that flow from our authentic needs and serve our sense of justice. For this reason, modern truthseekers must be guided by the additional criteria of autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity. These principles protect consciousness from the denigration to which it is susceptible in the context of modern society.

ii. Autonomy

In Rousseau's image of the golden age of human history, exemplified by Sparta and Rome, citizens immediately understood the truths that pertain to happiness simply by adhering to pervasive republican norms and duties. Independence was experienced as a collective phenomenon in an ideal and thoroughgoing synthesis of the particular and the general. With the proliferation of *amour propre* in modern society, this ceased to be the case. The path to truth must now pass through *individual* independence, which I refer to here as "autonomy," so as to distinguish it from the collective independence of Sparta and Rome. "Autonomy" might be seen as an odd choice of terms, because it is not one that Rousseau himself used. It is, nevertheless, commonly used in studies of Rousseau, because it is the term that most accurately captures his aversion to what he called "party men" and his faith in the *sentiment intérieur*.¹⁸ Privileging this inner feeling or inner voice over external, heteronomous sources of authority is the essence of Rousseauian autonomy, as I mean to describe it. Rousseau conveys this idea a letter to Sophie d'Houdetot, responding to her inquiry about the nature of morality:

There is then in the depths of all souls an innate principle of justice and moral truth anterior to all national prejudices, to all maxims of education. This principle is the involuntary rule based on which we judge our actions and those of others as good or bad in spite of our own maxims, and it is to this principle that I give the name of conscience. (ML, iv:1108; xii:195)¹⁹

Autonomy means following the inner voice of conscience first and national prejudices and maxims of education only when they conform to the dictates of conscience. It is only through this radical interiority that we modern men and women can escape the pernicious sociability of *amour propre* and return to our fellow human beings with a faithful love of justice and of humanity.

For this reason, Rousseau eventually came to regard his sometimes forced, sometimes voluntary exile as essential to his ability to perceive the truth. Though Rousseau's failure to find a lasting home in any community was one of the great disappointments of his life, he eventually acknowledged an unintended advantage to his perpetual otherness. In the *Confessions*, he explicitly connects his "daring to speak the truth" to his status as an outsider. (C, i:406; v:341) Truth-telling, like education, is less the consequence

of acquisition than it is the consequence of self-circumscribing, of “keeping tightly shut the passages through which” error may enter. (*D*, i:687; i:23) In the *Profession*, the vicar suggests that the surest path to the truths essential to our happiness may be to eschew public discourse altogether.

Let us assume that I was born on a desert island, that I have not seen any man other than myself, that I have never learned what took place in olden times in some corner of the world; nonetheless if I exercise my reason, if I cultivate it, if I make good use of my God-given faculties which require no intermediary, I would learn of myself to know Him, to love Him, to love His works, to want the good that He wants, and to fulfill all my duties on earth in order to please Him. What more will all the learning of men teach me? (*E*, iv:625; xiii:473)

Consulting philosophic works and engaging in public debates can, in exceptional circumstances, be beneficial, but, more often than not, it is detrimental to truthseeking. The vicar describes being tossed to and fro by arguments that seem logical and by objections he cannot resolve, which run counter to the dictates of his conscience. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau admits to resolving these crises by following his heart, even when it may have led his reason astray. Rousseau felt confident, he writes, as long as his “good faith” remained intact. This can be the case only if conscience is superior to intellect as a path to truth. Some forms of argumentation are purely intellectual, of course, but, for the most part, these were for Rousseau “metaphysical quibbles and subtleties,” which he gave no credence and denigrated, particularly when juxtaposed to the “fundamental principles adopted by my reason, confirmed by my heart, and which all carry the seal of inner assent.” (*R*, i:1018; viii:23)

Rousseauean autonomy means willing sincerely, which is to say willing *with* transparent attention to one’s inner voice and without regard for external pressures or influences. Descartes’ epistemology provides a useful comparison:

But it is not enough simply to know this; I must try to keep it in mind. For familiar beliefs return constantly and, almost in spite of me, they seize hold of my judgment as if it were bound to them by established custom and the law of familiarity.²⁰

Like Descartes’, Rousseau’s model of truthseeking begins with a negation of external influences. The first move is a negative one, a refusal of everything that is not the inner faculty both Descartes and Rousseau counsel us to follow. For Rousseau, however, this inner faculty is not the *cogito*—it is not our capacity for logical or formal reasoning. It is, rather, an innate feeling that Rousseau refers to as conscience or the *sentiment intérieur*. Whereas Descartes’ *cogito* shuts out external influences so as to reason

from a *tabula rasa*, Rousseau believed that the negation of all external influences reveals not a blank slate but a resounding inner voice. (ML, iv:1095; xii:186) Descartes' *cogito* begins with nothingness; it purges the mind of everything that can be called into doubt, establishing the mind as a *tabula rasa*, and it only then moves slowly, cautiously, and, above all, rationally toward affirmation. Rousseauean truthseeking begins negatively as well, by detaching the self from society and *amour propre*. But, unlike the *cogito*, Rousseau's initial movement is equally positive, a movement toward nature and sentiment—toward the heart. It is simultaneously a negation and an affirmation. Rousseau's truthseeker, once she silences all external voices, hears an inner voice—the voice of nature. Silence is required not so that we might finally think clearly but so that we might stop thinking long enough to hear the voice of nature that speaks to every person, but which cannot be discerned amidst the din of modern society. Another way of putting this would be to say that truthseekers must find a way of escaping—either by transcendence or renunciation—the variety of social artifices that mediate our relationship to our own existence.

The argument of the great ancient philosophers was that we must dominate our inclinations; the Hobbesian view was that we must control them; and Christian doctrine holds that we are meant to struggle against them. Rousseau, in a radical departure, argued that we should *follow* our inclinations. Rousseau did away with all authority that arrogated itself above the *sentiment intérieur*—the wise, the prophets, the powerful, the priests, the masters. With no authority above the individual and her inner voice, autonomy becomes central to Rousseau's philosophy of truthseeking. As the vicar puts it, “the principle of every action is in the will of a free being.” In fact, in the *Profession*, the vicar's foremost intention seems to be to encourage his pupil to “consult” his “heart.” This, the vicar avers, “is all I ask of you.” (E, iv:566; xiii:425) In society, the prevalence of *amour propre* obscures truths that would otherwise be immediately apparent. It causes people to forsake their autonomous will in favor of a heteronomous one, to believe, as Rousseau put it, not what they see but, rather, to see what they believe. (D, i:742; i:64)

This framework applies not only to personal decisions but to collective ones as well. In making political decisions, Rousseau counsels citizens to reason in the “silence of the passions” (GM, iii.286; iv:80), by which he meant that citizens should rely on their inner voice rather than the often tendentious rhetoric of public deliberation. A flourishing society depends on consensus, solidarity, and a concern for others, but citizens are more likely to recognize the importance of these values when they reason autonomously. Rousseau believed that consensus or universality would ironically be more likely achieved *via* the silent, autonomous reflection of each citizen than it would be *via* the public exchange of ideas. Rousseau's is a doctrine of inwardness, whether it be with respect to religion or politics, personal salvation or public deliberation; even if we ultimately want to expand our being, we must first turn inward.

In *Emile*, Rousseau provides a model as to how we might stay true to the *sentiment intérieur*, how we might, in other words, avoid succumbing to the pathology of seeing what we believe rather than believing what we see. In this text, the pupil's education is guided by necessity rather than curiosity, and his introduction to specific subjects is to be delayed until the time when he can make proper use of them. Emile is exposed only very cautiously and deliberately to philosophical and scientific ideas. There is, as Rousseau puts it, a “fitting age” for studying science. Emile will have “little knowledge,” because he will not be exposed to much, but what he has will be “truly his own.” (*E*, iv:487; xiii:358)²¹ It will be acquired out of necessity and through experience, rather than through books or a laboratory.

Our first masters of philosophy are our feet, our hands, our eyes. To substitute books for all that is not to teach us to reason. It is to teach us to use the reason of others. It is to teach us to believe much and never to know anything. (*E*, iv:370; xiii:264)²²

Belief, in a context of *amour propre*, tends to reflect a desire for the esteem of others, more than an honest assessment of what our faculties tell us. The best protection against this tendency is to learn for oneself.

Forced to learn by himself, he uses his reason and not another's; for to give nothing to opinion, one must give nothing to authority, and most of our errors come to us far less from ourselves than from others. (*E*, iv:487; xiii:358)

The tutor is concerned less to teach Emile the truth than to show him how to go about discovering it on his own. Learning from others is “servile submission,” which, while it can, by stroke of luck, occasionally yield real understanding, more often than not, leads to error. (*E*, iv:442; xiii:322)

This is precisely the origin of the “Frenchman’s” erroneous conception of Rousseau, as presented in the *Dialogues: Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*. The Frenchman could say what he does, the Rousseau character insists, only if he was not listening to his own honest judgment:

Nearly everything you have said to me in this discussion proves to me that you were not speaking for yourself. After learning from you how others feel, won't I ever learn how you feel? (*D*, i:771; i:86)²³

Most, Rousseau argued, act not out of personal necessity, not for the sake of personal happiness, and not on the basis of their conscience or *sentiment intérieur*. They act from a different impulse—the desire for distinction (e.g., to appear knowledgeable, cultured, talented, or well-mannered). Exercised appropriately, reason is exercised circumspectly and autonomously, which means keeping tightly shut the passages through which error may enter, so

that one acts only for the purpose of meeting an urgent, personal need and only under the guidance of one's own inner voice.

iii. Immediacy

Like utility, autonomy is not, in and of itself, sufficient as an ethics of truth-seeking. As we adjudicate among our various sentiments, intuitions, and desires—as we decide which of them have the greatest utility—it is critical that we also privilege immediacy and simplicity.

Immediacy, for Rousseau, meant privileging personally felt experience and sentiment over more mediated modes of engaging the world, e.g., customs, public opinion, books, and theories. Emile, for example, in his pre-adolescent education, is taught nothing about customs or habits. He learns no formulas or theories, except those he deduces on his own, from experience or inner sentiment. From Emile, Rousseau wrote, one should not expect “dictated speeches or studied manners.” (*E*, iv:421; xiii:304) Emile will faithfully cleave to only a few moral principles that relate to his “present condition” but imply nothing about more general human affairs. What Emile avows as a pre-adolescent is “the faithful expression of his ideas and the conduct born of his inclinations.” (*E*, iv:421; xiii:304) This unmediated relationship to knowledge becomes the foundation for Emile’s post-adolescent education, and, by implication, for Rousseau’s more general philosophy of truthseeking. In short, truthseekers must trust the simple immediacy of the heart and the senses over the elegance of theory and abstraction.

To illustrate this point, Rousseau narrates a story of Emile’s confusion at the optics of a stick fixed in a perpendicular position in water. The tutor encourages Emile to walk around the stick, examine it from different angles, stir the water surrounding the stick, and drain the water away, but he does not present Emile with any theories or formulas of dioptrics: “I would prefer that Emile never know dioptrics if he cannot learn it around this stick.” (*E*, iv:486; xiii:357) Emile is taught never to rush to judgment, never to concern himself with appearing clever or learned. Preferring ignorance to error, he will wait until he can confirm his intuitions through the use of his own senses and will judge “only on the basis of evidence.” (*E*, iv:484; xiii:356) Should he be unable to discern any patterns or principles based on his own observation and investigation, Emile will feel no shame. Inability to arrive at a judgment is nothing to be ashamed of, but Emile is taught to be embarrassed by faulty judgments.²⁴

Immediacy, for Rousseau, meant favoring experience over theory in scientific matters and sentiment over abstraction in moral ones. We can situate Rousseau’s doctrine of immediacy between Plato’s idealism and the empiricism of Locke and Condillac. Rousseau’s doctrine of immediacy adopted experience as a standard for external truths and conscience or the *sentiment intérieur* as the authority for moral or spiritual truth experience as a standard for external truths. This borrows from both idealism and empiricism,

while also refusing aspects of each. Rousseau opposed the idealists on the grounds that their thought was overly abstract—divorced from the immediate feelings of the heart and the conscience. At the same time, he opposed the empiricists on the grounds that they failed to account for the inner sentiment that is the source of morality and happiness. Rousseau deployed the empiricism of Condillac against the abstraction of the idealists and the *sentiment intérieur* against empiricism. The idealists were right, in Rousseau's view, that thoughts do not derive solely from the outside but wrong about the inner faculty that enables human beings to access truth. The critical inner faculty is not reason, according to Rousseau, but conscience. In either case, whether with respect to the external or internal world, Rousseau trusted the least mediated of his faculties to lead him to the truth.

Rousseau's transcendent illumination on the road to Vincennes provides a useful illustration. The illumination, as Rousseau characterized it, was felt emotionally, even physiologically, more than intellectually. This made it all the more reliable, in his view. Rousseau described the revelation in rich detail in a letter to Malesherbes:

If anything has ever resembled a sudden inspiration, it is the motion that was caused in my by that reading; suddenly I felt my mind dazzled by a thousand lights; crowds of lively ideas presented themselves at the same time with a strength and a confusion that threw me into an inexpressible perturbation; I feel my head seized by a dizziness similar to drunkenness. A violent palpitation oppresses me, makes me sick to my stomach; not being able to breathe anymore while walking I let myself fall under one of the trees of the avenue, and I pass a half-hour there in such an agitation that when I got up again I noticed the whole front of my coat soaked with my tears without having felt that I shed them. (*LMal*, i:1135–6; v:575)

Rousseau's dizziness, drunkenness, and violent palpitation are not evidence of irrationality, unreliability, or uncertainty; they are rather, for Rousseau, indicative of the power and authenticity—the truth—of the illumination. Rousseau's is a “system of the human heart.” (*D*, i:697; i:30) Even when Rousseau spoke of using his “own reason,” the context reveals that by this he meant following the *sentiment intérieur*. These appeals to interior assent could not satisfy the philosophical criteria of Rousseau's contemporaries, or even Rousseau's own sense of what constituted philosophical discourse. Philosophy had been (and generally continues to be) associated with the commanding authority of reason in one form or another and opposed to the notion that sentiment could ever be the wellspring of truth. In response, Rousseau offered a distinction between different kinds of sentiment—between the “secret penchants of our heart” and “the even more secret, more internal *dictamen* which entreats and murmurs against these self-interested decisions, and leads us back in spite of ourselves onto the road

of the truth.”²⁵ (*LF*, iv:11 38; viii:263). While the former lead us astray, the latter provides the only “safeguard against the sophisms of . . . reason.” (*LF*, iv:1138; viii:263)²⁶

Rousseau’s defense of interiority and subjectivity was grounded less in reason—as it had been for Descartes, Locke, and Shaftesbury—than it was in sentiment. Building on Hutcheson’s notion that our sentiments accord with the truth, Rousseau argued that our sentiments are actually our most reliable faculty. In matters of morality in particular, sentiment and experience speak more truthfully than reason. While reason is necessary for understanding what morality requires, the “accuracy of reason” is “a result of ‘the cultivation of . . . inclinations’ and of ‘the experience which concentrates the wishes of a great soul.’” (*E*, iv:548; xiii:410) Rousseau frequently referred to this constellation of inclinations as “conscience,” which he described as “the best of all casuists” and defined as a love of order, both moral and spiritual. (*E*, iv:594; xiii:449)²⁷ Reason deceives, the vicar tells a young Rousseau, but conscience never does because conscience is the voice of nature, which is to say, conscience is unmediated.²⁸ It is conscience that directs the truthseeker to eschew the mystifying passions associated with *amour propre*.²⁹

If Rousseau was able to rediscover truths that remained opaque to most, he was certain that it had been because he consulted his conscience more than his reason.³⁰ This does not mean that Rousseau was an irrationalist or that he would counsel us to stop thinking; Rousseau rather encourages us to transform the *way* that we think, to think in the way that we feel. We do not feel in a vacuum. We feel always in response to something in our surroundings. This dynamic is made plain in Rousseau’s account of reverie. Reverie, as practiced by Rousseau, purges initiative from mental activity; it is less reflection than it is reaction. Rousseau’s point was not that we ought not think, but that we ought not think unless we are prompted by some problem or stimulus. Rousseau wrote the *Reveries* with no intention to publish the text (if we are to take him at his word). It was written, he claims, in response to a very specific and urgent need, thrust upon him by his forced exile. In solitude, Rousseau turned inward, not out of selfishness or vanity, but to survive psychologically. This is why Rousseau says his tormentors actually did him a favor by forcing him into exile. (*R*, i:1002–1003; viii:9) By purging himself of everything external, he was able to turn inward, to find himself, locate himself, orient himself, not intersubjectively (in the opinion of others) but introspectively (in communion with nature).

What is most dangerous is an unhinged, unbridled reason, divorced from sentiment—what Kant would later call pure reason and Julie decries as “the vain sophisms of a reason that relies on itself alone.” (*NH*, ii:359; vi:295) Voltaire’s essay on Lisbon struck Rousseau in this way, as detached, removed, and overly intellectualized, reminiscent of the imaginary philosopher’s response to human suffering in the second *Discourse*: “perish if you wish, I am safe.” (iii:156; iii:37) Rousseau was inspired to respond to

Voltaire by the absence of what calls “humanity” in the essay. Our response to suffering must come from the heart and remain anchored there, even as we lay out a more formalized response for philosophical or practical purposes. In the *Moral Letters*, Rousseau tells Sophie d'Houdetot that it is more important to love virtue than to explain it. (*ML*, iv:1086; xii:179) When asked by Mme d'Houdetot for the “rules of morality,” Rousseau responded with the utmost care and commitment, but he did not exactly comply with Sophie’s request. Rather than offer her rules of morality, Rousseau instead tried to present her with a reason to love morality. (*ML*, iv:1081; xii:175) If successful, Rousseau believed he would have given her a sturdier foundation for morality than mastery of any rules.

There is a sense in which the question of mediation is academic, because, for Rousseau, there was no possibility of reasoning without feeling. The impulse to divorce reason from sentiment is itself reflective of a deeper feeling or inclination toward an impossible detachment. “To exist for us is to sense,” meaning that there is no question of silencing sentiment, only a question of whether it is wise to attempt to do so. (*E*, iv:600; xiii:452) “On every subject important to society, I know that no one can refuse a declaration of his sentiments”³¹ Passions can only be opposed by passions. Those who argue the reverse do so to elevate themselves, but, as Rousseau put it in the *Dialogues*, they are deluded. (i:1571; i:170) We are stuck with our sentiments whether we want them or not. Attempts to mediate sentiment through detached reasoning will inevitably be infiltrated by one or another declaration of our sentiments. If this is the case, better, Rousseau thought, to draw on the pure sentiments of conscience than on those associated with *amour propre*.

iv. Simplicity

In the first part of this chapter, it was established that truthseeking, if it is to succeed, must be motivated by utility. Utility alone, however, provides an insufficient guide for modern men and women, most of whom will require further guidance with respect to distinguishing between those things that are truly her interest and those things which only appear to be. With respect to this question of discernment, Rousseau counsels us to prefer our own voice to the judgment of others, to privilege sentiment over reason, and, finally to favor the simple over the sophisticated.

Among the many thoughts that ran through Rousseau’s mind on the road to Vincennes, one of the most powerful was the realization than the “purification of morals” could never be the result of sophistication. Morality, Rousseau wrote in his response to the Dijon Academy’s question, is a “sublime science of simple souls.” (*DAS*, iii:30; ii:22) Upon seeing the question, Rousseau realized that sophistication, for which he had always had an innate disdain, was more than a symptom of the corruption of modern Europe—it was one of its principal causes. The truths that matter are those, and only those, that are necessary to happiness. They are not very

numerous; they pertain primarily to justice, and they must be distinguished from “truths which have no practical or instructive value.” Although we describe both “useful” and “trivial” truths with the same word (*vérité*), the fact that we do so is lamentable: the “sacred name of truth is debased if applied to vain things whose existence is indifferent to all.” (*R*, i:1027; viii:30) The few, simple truths that pertain to human happiness are known immediately to all human beings. They are our birthright and can be concealed from us only by “the most iniquitous of all robberies.” (*R*, i:1026; viii:30) Conscience itself preaches the sublime science of simple souls, and it is only under the influence of *amour propre* that one becomes enamored of more sophisticated truths.³²

Across the spectrum of Rousseau’s work, one of his primary claims was that the sophistication of which we moderns are so proud has mostly corrupted us.

Do not expect to find either metaphysical dissertations here or all the apparatuses of words, which many readers will doubtless seek and which only serve to render man more vain without rendering him either better or more enlightened. This doctrinal affectation suits neither this author nor the work, in which the subject is more a question of feeling than of discerning and the simplest always understand better than the most learned.³³

This sentiment is true not just of Rousseau’s ethics, but of his epistemology as well. Everything begins for Rousseau from a posture of cultivated simplicity. The vicar captures Rousseau’s position:

Always remember that he who speaks to you is neither a scholar nor a philosopher, but a simple man, a friend of the truth without party, without system; a solitary who, living little among men, has less occasion to contract their prejudices and more time to reflect on what strikes him when he has commerce with them. (*E*, iv:347; xiii:246)

Rousseau associates simplicity with solitude and the inner voice, and sophistication with social customs, prejudices and status. Truth itself is simple and common and only appears to be rarefied when obscured by the veil of *amour propre*. In other words, while truth is simple, the “veils” in which the truth is “enveloped” are complex, and that is why only “sublime geniuses” are capable of perceiving it. (*PN*, ii:970; ii:195) One must be capable of resisting the “stupidity of vanity, base jealousy, and other passions that engender the taste for letters.” (*PN*, ii:970; ii:195) Indeed, one must honor what the vicar terms the “involuntary skepticism” that requires us to be “circumspect,” to “respect what one can neither reject nor understand,” secure in the faith that God has given us all the we need to know in order to be happy. (*E*, iv:627; xiii:475)

Rousseau believed that it was his unique ability to resist the “stupidity of vanity” that justified his reluctant decision to add volumes to the already overwrought bookshelves of modern Europe: “If the example of an innocent and simple life is useful to men, I can provide this good for them, but that is the only one. . . .” (CC, to Victor Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau, 31 Jan. 1767, 5695, xxxii:83) Rousseau saw himself as a savage in society, a modern with the soul of an ancient, able to hear the universal *voix intérieur* that had been overwhelmed in most, under the weight of modern civilization.

My method will be simpler and more certain. In plumbing my natural instincts, I dare to think that they are right. I believe I have found in my desires the image of a good man and have no better way of telling you what it is than by telling you what I would like to be.³⁴

Accessing the truth is much more a matter of subtraction than of addition. Rather than add to the repository of human knowledge, Rousseau tried to uncover truths that have been obscured by the vast accumulation of human cogitation. Rousseau was concerned not to “establish new truths” but rather to “attack error.” (*On Luxury, Commerce, and the Arts*, OC, iii:516) The old truths are enough. With respect to anything more, Rousseau suggested that we practice a “reasonable kind of ignorance, which consists in confining one’s curiosity to the extent of the faculties which one has received.” (O, iii:54; ii:51)³⁵ This “gentle and precious” ignorance is genuine philosophy, the sublime science of simple souls, which is based less on amassing knowledge than on safeguarding the wisdom that is already in our possession. It is a “modest ignorance . . . born of a lively love of virtue, and inspires only indifference toward all things that are not worthy of filling a man’s heart.” (O, iii:54; ii:51–2) Intellectual virtue, exemplified by Socrates, was for Rousseau a function not of how much one knows but of what one thinks about, of what occupies one’s heart. The genuine philosopher is enlightened not because her thought is nuanced or sophisticated (though it very well might be both), but because it is animated always by the simple and few truths essential to human happiness.

This was the basis of Rousseau’s esteem for Socrates, and it was for the same reason that Rousseau so admired Jesus. Unlike many of those who later claimed to speak for him, Jesus never mentioned learning (except to criticize it), preferring always the “lowly and the simple” to the “learned.” (O, iii:45; ii:44–5) The truths we need are simple. In his many battles with religious authorities, Rousseau cast himself as a pious Christian, loyal to the example of Jesus and the “twelve poor fisherman and artisans” who undertook to share his message with the world. Rousseau’s version of Christianity, as we will see in chapter six, always emphasized “duty over dogma,” “good works” over “articles of faith,” and “acts of virtue” over “formulas of belief.” (LB, iv:960; ix:47) Rousseau (re)interpreted Christianity, in other words, so as to make it into another version of the sublime science of simple souls.

Very little is required to understand the few truths that are useful, and those truths that require sophistication in order to be understood are generally not useful and are often dangerous. In public life, as Rousseau put it, “peace, union, and equality are enemies of political subtleties.” (SC, iii:437; iv:198) The happiest people on earth are “upright and simple,” because, in their simplicity, they are protected from “traps and refined pretext.” There is wisdom in their simplicity, and, while it may not dazzle or captivate a modern reader, it is the best guarantor of truth for all but a very few.

When, among the happiest people in the world, groups of peasants are seen deciding the affairs of state under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can one help scorning the refinements of other nations, which make themselves illustrious and miserable with so much art and mystery? (SC, iii:436; iv:198)

It is difficult for the contemporary reader to accept the anachronism of peasants deciding the affairs of state under an oak tree, even in the context of eighteenth-century Geneva or Berne, which Rousseau cited as exemplars of simple virtue. Moreover, even if we deign to imagine with Rousseau this hypothetical oak tree, under which affairs of state are decided, we can just as easily imagine it as a site of prejudice or mystification as a site of simple virtue.

Rousseau’s claim, we should note, was not that simplicity always serves truth and sophistication error, but rather that simplicity is a more reliable path to truth than is sophistication. “General and abstract ideas,” as the vicar puts it, “are the source of men’s greatest errors.” (E, iv:577; xiii:434) While in certain, highly circumscribed cases, general and abstract ideas can also lead to truth, on the whole and for the most part, we will be better off following the simple dictates of the *sentiment intérieur*.

When Sophie d’Houdetot asked Rousseau for moral guidance, he chose not to provide the kind of philosophical excursus that she probably expected. Instead, he counseled her to simplify her life, to prune away the sophistication so that she could discover the answers for herself. Mme d’Houdetot, Rousseau suggested, should renounce her “station,” if only momentarily, so that she might “keep up a conversation with [herself] more immediately.” To hear the simplicity of the inner voice, she first needed to silence the noise of her “house’s retinue.” (ML, iv:1116; xii:201)

When you go on your retreats . . . do not take along either cook or butler. Take a lackey and a chambermaid. That is still too much; in a word do not transport the life of the city to the country; go there genuinely to taste the retired and rustic life. But the proprieties. Ah! Always those fatal proprieties! If you want to listen to them endlessly, you do not need any other guide; choose between them and wisdom. (ML, iv:1116–7; xii:201–2)

Simplicity is its own reward in that it is itself a repository for wisdom. It is also an instrument, as Rousseau explains to Madame d'Houdetot, inasmuch as it facilitates immediacy—existence “without admixture and without obstacle,” as Rousseau puts it in the *Reveries*. (i:1098; viii:89) Cultivating an ethos of simplicity has the effect of clearing away the obstacles to truth so that consciousness might grasp it once again. The ineffable human desire is to extend one’s being, but Rousseau’s advice is often to constrain, circumscribe, and simplify one’s consciousness. An expansive soul, Rousseau maintains, is the consequence of an introspective, perhaps even solitary consciousness. The soul’s inward turn is the precondition for its outward expansion.

This will be the path followed by all of the truthseekers examined in the second part of this book, whether they be solitary walkers, republican citizens, Christian believers, or the genuine philosophers invoked at the end of the first *Discourse*. All will begin by circumscribing themselves, so as to shut out external voices and hear clearly the simple voice of the *sentiment intérieur*. And, having made this inward turn, when they do ultimately turn outward, they will do so inured to the deceptions that follow from the mediation and sophistication characteristic of modern society.

Rousseau’s philosophy of truth was unique for its time (and ours) because it was driven by a unique set of questions. Traditionally, philosophies of truth are abstract, seeking to answer questions like: What is truth? How is knowledge possible? What does it mean for a statement to be true? As we have seen, Rousseau did not believe that questions like these were susceptible to philosophical analysis, nor did he regard them as worthy of inquiry. For Rousseau, the problem was not to define what truth is or to puzzle over whether it could be known. Rousseau began from the conviction that truth exists, that it is susceptible to human understanding, and that it was, in fact, known to human beings in their natural state and in the golden age of history. The question for Rousseau became how truth—at least those truths necessary for human happiness—could be rediscovered in a historical context that had rendered them opaque.

In the earlier historical eras of the savage and the Spartan, human beings had no need for the philosophy of truthseeking that Rousseau developed for modern men and women. For both the savage and the Spartan, the “sublime science of simple souls” was second nature. These people had yet to become divided against themselves and so had no need for the philosophy presented here. For them, it was sufficient to pursue their self-interest unreflectively; this simple impulse led them to fall into communion with their surroundings, whether it be the physical world (in the case of the savage) or the republic of virtue (in the case of the ancient citizen). For us, by contrast, the quest for truth is more fraught, not because the truths that pertain to

human happiness have changed, but rather because we have placed barriers between those truths and ourselves.

This predicament led Rousseau to an ethics of truthseeking that combined ontology and epistemology. To (re)discover truth was to cultivate a certain set of dispositions. It was to favor feeling over reason, the heart over the mind, the simple over the sophisticated, the useful over the demonstrable, the personal over the systematic. Together, these dispositions constitute Rousseau's ethics of truthseeking—a mode of engaging the world by which individuals can overcome the stubborn barriers to truth that pervade modern society.

Notes

- 1 See Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1972).
- 2 Michael Davis reports that the word “heart” appears 19 times in the third Walk, and 18 times in the sixth Walk of the *Reveries*. *The Autobiography of Philosophy: Rousseau’s “The Reveries of the Solitary Walker”* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) 145, 191.
- 3 Melzer, “The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment,” 358.
- 4 Melzer, “The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment,” 359.
- 5 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 362.
- 6 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 362.
- 7 Alessandro Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study of the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) 86.
- 8 Ferrara, *Modernity and Authenticity*, 87. This is what Rousseau famously asserted he had achieved in his *Confessions* and what distinguished his autobiographical writings from those of others, Montaigne's in particular. Whereas Rousseau had displayed a portrait of himself that was “in every way true to nature,” Montaigne had achieved only the “pretense of confessing his faults,” because he had admitted only the likeable ones. (C, i:516–7; v:433) He had performed no comprehensive, honest inventory of his character, as Rousseau claimed to have done for his autobiography. He, unlike Montaigne, had been true to himself. And, so while Montaigne had told the truth about himself, he had not conveyed an authentic picture of himself.
- 9 Lionel Trilling (following Henri Peyre) captures this nuance by distinguishing between “the French and the English mode of sincerity.” *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 58. “In French literature,” Trilling writes, “sincerity consists in telling the truth about oneself to oneself and to others; by truth is meant a recognition of such of one's own traits or actions as are morally or socially discreditable and, in conventional course, concealed. English sincerity does not demand this confrontation of what is base or shameful in oneself. The English ask of the sincere man that he communicate without deceiving or misleading.” (58)
- 10 Though Rousseau claimed it was the Academy's posting that impelled him to write, he had actually written quite broadly before the illumination on the road to Vincennes. To be fair to Rousseau, his response to the Academy's question inaugurated an explosion of literary activity and a transformation in his thinking.

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- 11 See also, *E*, iv:428; xiii:310.
- 12 In the *Confessions*, Rousseau describes his political theory as motivated by an interest in the “great truths useful to the happiness of the human race.” (i:405; v:340) Rousseau intended to call a prospective work on religion “The Utility of Religion.” (i:972; i:242) Finally, in response to criticism from unnamed “Gens de loi,” who accused Rousseau of positing authorities higher than the king of France, Rousseau answered that he had written only “useful truths.” (to Gens de loi, CC, 14 Oct. 1758, 712, v:177)
- 13 In the *Dialogues*, the Rousseau character describes J. J. as interested only in those things that “touch him.” (i:808; i:115) In *Emile*, it is utility that drives the pupil’s education: “My object is not to give him science but to teach him to acquire science when needed.” (iv:487; xiii:358) In the *Profession*, the vicar claims to be interested only in knowledge that is “useful for practice.” (*E*, iv:570; xiii:429)
- 14 In the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Rousseau has Julie write, “Monsieur de Crouzas has just given us a refutation of Pope’s epistles which I have read with displeasure. I do not know which of the two authors is right; but I know well that Monsieur de Crouzas’s book will never inspire a good deed, and that there is nothing good one is not tempted to do after reading Pope’s.” (ii:261; vi:214) Shklar adds, “Rousseau was far too skeptical to care about the truth of men’s beliefs. All that mattered was their tendency to promote or retard the miseries of social life.” (*Men and Citizens*, 77)
- 15 As a young man, Rousseau stole a small silver ribbon he found among the belongings of the comtesse de Vercellis, his recently deceased employer. When confronted, Rousseau accused Marion, a fellow servant, rather than accept blame himself.
- 16 “To lie without profit or prejudice to ourselves or another is not to lie: it is not a lie; it is a fiction.” (*R*, i:1029; viii:32)
- 17 “How can one systematically and in good faith be a skeptic? I cannot understand it. These skeptic philosophers either do not exist or are the unhappiest of men. Doubt about the things it is important for us to know is too violent a state for the human mind, which does not hold out in this state for long.” (*E*, iv:567–8; xiii:427)
- 18 “In general, any party man, by that alone an enemy of the truth, will always hate J.J.” (*D*, i:965; i:237)
- 19 See also *D*, i:972; i:242.
- 20 René Descartes, *Meditations*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (New York: Penguin, 2000) 21.
- 21 While Emile’s education is guided by the principle of autonomy, Emile is actually manipulated in often elaborate ways by the tutor. How much does it matter that Emile’s autonomy is a contrivance, created under the vigilant supervision of the tutor? It turns out that, paradoxically, autonomy requires intervention, not only in *Emile*, but in Rousseau’s political works as well. (*The Legislator of the Social Contract* is the embodiment of this puzzle.) Cooper draws an analogy to the dynamic of tree pruning. The pruning of a tree scales back its movement temporarily, so as to energize it over time. *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 100. Similarly, Rousseau writes in *Emile*, “One must use a great deal of art to prevent social man from being totally artificial.” (*E*, iv:640; xiii:485)
- 22 “Poetry, literature, history, philosophy, even politics, one can notice right away by the style of all books that they are written to amuse pretty women.” (*NH*, ii:276; vi:226)
- 23 Similarly, in a letter to Sophie d’Houdetot, Rousseau wrote, “In asking me what virtue is, do you set out to embarrass me more than to educate yourself? I could tell you in two words that it is something one can learn only from oneself and

- that you will never know if your heart has not already answered you in advance.” (Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 133.)
- 24 For a full account of tutor’s cultivation of judgment in *Emile*, see Denise Schaeffer, *Rousseau: On Education, Freedom, and Judgment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014)
 - 25 In notes on Helvétius’s *On the Mind*, Rousseau similarly distinguishes between “simple sensations” and “sentiments.” iv:1121; xii:204 Simple sensations or passions are narrow and entirely self-regarding, while sentiments are universal and oriented toward an enlarged love of order. When the soul is properly ordered, “sublime sentiments stifle the germ of the petty passions,” but, in a “narrow soul . . . vile passions” stifle “delicious sentiments.” (*E*, iv:548; xiii:410, iv:596; xiii:450)
 - 26 Without the *sentiment intérieur*, Rousseau wrote to Franquières, “there would soon remain no traces of truth on earth.” (*LF*, iv:1139; viii:264) Similarly, in *The State of War*, Rousseau wrote that natural law would “hardly be capable of directing the majority of our actions . . . if natural law were written only in human reason . . . , but it is also engraved in man’s heart in indelible characters and it is there that it speaks more strongly than do all the precepts of Philosophers . . . ” (iii:602; xi:65) In *Emile*, Rousseau wrote, “It is not true that the precepts of natural law are founded on reason alone. They have a base more solid and sure. Love of men derived from love of self.” (*E*, iv:523 xiii:389)
 - 27 As Cooper has shown, Rousseau’s used “conscience” not (only) in its ordinary usage but in a more expansive, more basic sense. Cooper calls conscience a “principle of the soul,” in order to capture Rousseau’s conception of conscience as “more basic than and anterior to the passions.” *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, 91. Conscience, Cooper explains, is the animating principle of the soul, comparable to the relationship between instinct and the body.
 - 28 The *Confessions* can be approached as an attempt to make plain the truth of this principle. “The whole *Confessions*,” writes one of the text’s translators, “is an attempt to prove feelings convey truth better than the brain.” J. M. Cohen, “Introduction” to *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Penguin, 1953). Rousseau’s life was of general interest, he felt, because he had lived a uniquely unmediated life, guided always by his heart.
 - 29 However influenced by Condillac, and there is no doubt that Rousseau relied heavily on Condillac in matters of epistemology, Rousseau ultimately moved away from Condillac’s (and Locke’s) sensationalism. While he subscribed to Condillac’s basic epistemological principle that knowledge originates in concrete experience rather than in abstraction, he could not accept the notion that knowledge is only an accumulation of sense impressions. This model may accurately describe knowledge of the external world, but Rousseau believed that the inner world—conscience or the *sentiment intérieur*—could not be explained this way. The heart speaks in its own voice; it is the voice of God and nature and can be discerned not through sensation but through introspection or communion with oneself. Rousseau’s break with empiricism comes, as Ernst Cassirer puts it, “not as an epistemologist but as a moralist.” *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Indiana University Press, 1975) 114.
 - 30 With regard to questions of truth, Rousseau was certain that, as he put it in the third Walk, “my heart replied . . . better than my reason.” (*R*, i:1016; viii:21) In a contest between Rousseau’s sentiment and the “truths urged against [him],” Rousseau tells us that he will make sentiment the ultimate arbiter—above his reason, even Scripture, because sentiment is the voice of God. (*O*, iii:35; ii:37)
 - 31 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 134.

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- 32 C. N. Dugan and Tracy Strong have shown that Rousseau favored the simple over the complex in his writings on music. He was, for example, opposed to “double representation,” in which operatic action diverged from the music, and to harmony, which interfered with his preference for “unity of melody.” The reliance on harmony relocates the emotional center of music away from its undifferentiated origin, in which music and language were one and the same. “Music, Politics, Theater, and Representation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 351–2.
- 33 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 134.
- 34 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 135.
- 35 Rousseau distinguished this laudable ignorance from “a ferocious and brutal ignorance which is born of a wicked heart and a false mind.” (O, iii:54; ii51–2)

Part Two

Rousseau's Pathways to Truth

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4 Reverie

Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* is a minor work when Rousseau is read as a moralist or political theorist, as he most often is, but the text becomes central when Rousseau is read as a philosopher of truth. The *Reveries* is not an idiosyncratic text in the context of Rousseau's system. Reverie is Rousseau's last and most successful (in his view) attempt to recuperate natural goodness—the ideal that got Rousseau's philosophical system started and the recovery of which he had previously deemed impossible. Reverie is the overcoming of *amour propre*, and the experience of reverie was the closest Rousseau could come to capturing the fundamental ecstasy of communion, common to its various manifestations, whether it be communion with God, nature, or with other human beings. This feeling can be described in texts, but it can be grasped only by the heart. Reverie clears away obstacles, allowing us to lead with our heart.

The *Reveries* was a nostalgic attempt to recuperate the ecstasies of Rousseau's youth, which were lost when he was propelled into his literary career by what he called "foreign impulsions." (R, i:1062; viii:58) As a form of writing, the *Reveries* constituted a new paradigm, one that Rousseau hoped would enable him to speak only from the inside and convey thoughts without filter or comment but rather, as he put it, "as [they] came to me." (R, i:1000; viii:7) While there are moments of philosophizing in the *Confessions* and in the *Dialogues*, the *Reveries* is unique for its consistent fusing of the philosophical with the biographical. Rousseau had consistently put actions over words (*DAS*, iii:30; ii:22 and *Fragment*, i:1129; xii:44), but, in the *Reveries*, his biography becomes his philosophy, filtered through the lens of reverie.

I. Reverie and Reverie

Rousseau describes his *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* as the "faithful record" of his reveries, which he defines as a state in which "I leave my head entirely free and let my ideas follow their bent without resistance or constraint." (R, i:1002; viii:9) The textual form of the *Reveries* is, therefore, distinct from the experience of reverie itself. It is necessary to distinguish

between reverie and what, following Michael Davis, we might call “Reverie,” the former being the subject of our inquiry, the latter being the textual form Rousseau employs to describe this subject.¹ While reverie is a medium for accessing truth, Reverie is the best available, but very imperfect, medium for offering an account of reverie. Rousseau’s *Reveries*, then, is not a collection of reveries; it is a collection of stories and lessons gleaned from reverie and translated for the purposes of Reverie.

As a form of autobiography, Reverie allowed Rousseau to close the gap between author and subject. Critical readers of autobiography will understand that the writer and her subject are different, even if they are, in the most obvious way, the same. Throughout his autobiographical writings, Rousseau attempted to shrink the distance between his subject and its representation, to present the least mediated picture of himself that the constraints of textuality would allow. In the *Confessions*, he had attempted it by presenting an unfiltered account of his past, aspiring to convey an accurate, comprehensive narrative of his life, blemishes and all. In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau tried to close this gap by splitting himself in two, in an effort to distinguish between the man himself and his reputation. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau attempted it by directly *transcribing* rather than *describing* a set of experiences. In the process, Rousseau believed he had arrived at a deeper understanding of his own moral purity. Even when others were not, Rousseau was always sure there was something special about his writings, something he identified with the purity or innocence of the savage. Late in life, he realized that his whole *corpus* was the product of discoveries made in reverie, or something very like it, in its emphasis on sentiment over reason, openness over dogma, the inner voice over philosophical discourse. Reverie revealed the essence of Rousseau’s goodness, of his integrity, and, by implication, the goodness of all humankind, because Rousseau attributed his unique goodness to his proximity to humanity’s original goodness. Reverie returned Rousseau to himself, to his essence, which is the essence of all humankind. And that is why it allowed the fellowship that had eluded Rousseau for so much of his life. Modern corruption makes a meeting of the minds unlikely in social life, but a *communion des coeurs* is possible, it turns out, if we turn away from society and turn inward, toward natural goodness.

As Rousseau prepared to exalt the benefits of reverie, the term did not have a positive charge in European philosophical discourse. The influential philosopher and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*, Baron d’Holbach, had called reverie “senseless” in an essay called “Good Sense.”² In celebrating it, Rousseau was making a radical claim in favor of sentiment over reason, in favor of immediacy and simplicity over sophistication. He embraced reverie as one of several pathways toward understanding that he considered preferable to discourse and to reason. Whereas society and the philosophy it nourishes had alienated civilized peoples from the *vérités éternelles* of human existence, Rousseau believed that reverie could return us to them. Reverie

allows these essential truths, so simple by their nature, to return from their exile at the hand of *amour propre*. It does this by putting us in touch with our sentiments, which, as we saw in chapter two, Rousseau believed to be naturally good and pure. Whereas philosophy represses and manages sentiment, reverie amplifies it. Now, this amplification of sentiment is not without its perils. As is the case with all modes of engaging the world, reverie can become corrupted.

In order for reverie to evoke the proper sentiments the subject must situate herself in a felicitous place, such as the remote Île de Bac. Our sentiments are naturally good, but, like everything else, they can become corrupted in human hands. We must elicit the noble sentiments that follow from *amour de soi* rather than the corrupt ones that emerge from inflamed *amour propre*. If not, we risk falling into one of the philosophical reveries lamented in Rousseau's *Discourses* and *Moral Letters*.³ Reverie might be formless, but it is not undirected or unconditioned; rather, it is conditioned by the environment (psychological, social and physical) in which it is experienced. Solitude and nature are the two key components of Rousseauian reverie, which is why Rousseau's botanical endeavors provide a good entry point.⁴ However, if solitude and nature are replaced by Parisian society, reverie, while formless, will be driven by, and attuned toward, corruption.

The second *Discourse*, as we saw in chapter one, is the anchor for what Rousseau called his “system.” Most of Rousseau's ensuing writings should be read as a series of responses to the pathologies identified in this text. The second *Discourse* is a chronicle of humanity's alienation from natural goodness, while *Emile*, *The Social Contract*, *Julie*, and the *Reveries* describe ways of recuperating natural goodness in a modern context. The *Reveries* is an account of Rousseau's personal return to himself—his successful transcendence of *amour propre* and ensuing communion with nature. Reverie is functionally parallel to (though qualitatively distinct from) the citizen's return to wholeness in the virtuous republic, Emile's independence, and the harmony of life at Clarens. Each of these images of unity represents the recuperation of natural goodness, *via* either an escape from *amour propre* or a transcendence of it. The deleterious effects of *amour propre*, it turns out, can be overcome either by dissociating oneself entirely from it or by generalizing completely its influence.⁵ Both *Emile* and the *Reveries* adopt the former strategy. Emile, as befits a child, is protected by a pedagogy of prevention, whereby he is insulated from the corrupting effects of social life. By contrast, the Rousseau of the *Reveries*, as suits an exile, dissociates himself from *amour propre* through a strategy of flight or escape. If *amour propre* thrives only in society, Rousseau will escape *amour propre* by escaping society.

From what has been said to this point, the *Reveries* would appear to be a paradox—a written account of an extra-linguistic or anti-linguistic experience. Moreover, Rousseau seems to doubt the fecundity of language, suggesting that reverie loses too much if defined through linguistic conventions.⁶

If, as Rousseau believed, language cannot capture and, in fact, almost always distorts the truths reverie makes apparent, is it not a contradiction to write a book of reveries? A book *on* reverie could be justified but not a book *of* reveries. As a pathway to truth, language is even worse than thinking—more restricted and confined by social conventions. If thinking is opposed to reverie, language is as much or more so. To write down a reverie, then, would seem to implicate the writer in a contradiction. Reverie cannot be captured in language; it is intended by Rousseau to evoke those inner truths that language necessarily dilutes. So a new style of philosophical writing becomes necessary, a style of philosophical writing that escapes the impotence of words by using them as components of a composition, as a poet does, or as a musician uses notes, or as an orator uses rhetoric. The *Reveries* attempts to capture in words that which words cannot capture. Written *Reveries*, as we have noted, are quite distinct from the experience of reverie; however, they can and, as most readers of the *Reveries* attest, do evoke the spirit of reverie. This is not, incidentally, the first time for Rousseau. The Legislator must do the same thing in *The Social Contract*; public festivals perform a similar function in the *Letter to d'Alembert*; and Emile's tutor employs a series of methods to communicate truths non-didactically.⁷

The title of the text itself suggests the contradiction: *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. These are reveries of a solitary *walker*. When we walk, we do not write. Rousseau walks to escape his literary life, his public life. Walking (*se promener*) is a partly symbolic, partly literal putting aside of words and publicity. The walks of a *promeneur* are closer to strolls; the *promeneur* goes for a walk, generally to clear her thoughts, to open her mind. It is an activity that Rousseau conceives of as antithetical to writing. Consequently, when Rousseau says he transcribes his reveries, he must really be translating them, putting them into words, artfully capturing the truth of his reveries in the effect of his words. The words must combine to produce the effect on the reader that the original reverie produced in Rousseau. And that transformation, literally the altering of the form of reverie, from anti-linguistic to linguistic—is what distinguishes a written Reverie from the experience of reverie itself.

In Reverie, Rousseau wants to write without writing, to write without the inevitable distortions that accompany writing. He wants to capture *in* writing his preference for action *over* writing: “without envying the glory of those famous men who are immortalized in the Republic of Letters, let us try to put between them and us that glorious distinction noted between two great Peoples long ago: that the one knew how to speak well, the other to act well.” (DAS, iii:29; ii:22) Rousseau’s preference for those who act well over those who speak well implies much more than a preference for Sparta over Athens. We would like to do both well, of course, and, while that is perhaps not impossible, it is very tricky. A taste for Athenian oration is rarely accompanied by a commitment to Spartan virtue. And if one’s choice is between acting well while speaking poorly and speaking well while acting

poorly, there was simply no question for Rousseau. And so his writings denigrate writing. His narratives denigrate narration. The ultimate message of Rousseau's philosophy is that we should refrain from philosophizing; instead, we should, as Rousseau put it, circumscribe ourselves.⁸

Of course, to fully circumscribe oneself would be to abstain altogether from writing, which inherently implicates the writer in the diluting effects of language. Reverie is the next best thing, a form of writing capable of depicting truths previously inaccessible to philosophical inquiry. Reverie's medium is its message. Rousseau's text is more a performative critique of philosophy than it is a didactic one. We are less convinced of the superiority of reverie than we are persuaded of it. Although Rousseau attributes his greatness to his unique proximity to natural goodness, equally significant is his ability to reproduce the love of natural goodness in us, through his rhetorical style—his ability to seduce us either into reverie or into a desire for reverie. In this seduction, the denotative dimension of language is of little use. Rousseau uses language as a painter uses color and gesture or a musician uses harmony, melody, and tempo; he uses language to depict his soul through the melodious mixture of words. This rhetorical power makes other similarly skilled writers a threat, but we are assured that we need not worry in Rousseau's case, for his goodness ensures that his writing will serve only truth and justice.

So Reverie is a textual form, invented to capture the truths made accessible in reverie. But truth, for Rousseau, is not a linguistic construct, nor can linguistic constructs convey it. Language itself, in Rousseau's view is born out of an inadequacy—the human inability to convey the truth it experiences naturally. Reverie is, then, a contradiction in terms, a form of writing intended to capture reverie, the ultimate anti-linguistic experience. For this reason, the act of writing itself necessarily becomes one of the principal subjects of the book, as Rousseau explores both the poverty of language and the resources it makes available for capturing truths that exist independent of linguistic constructs and that language has almost universally obscured.⁹ The *Reveries* are marked by Rousseau's desire to close the gap between signifier and signified, to capture meaning in a way that language cannot. Reverie is an escape from the confines of language, the activity of a mind seeking repose from the challenge of communication.

Rousseau lamented his decision to begin writing because, for all of his talents, he felt that he never could communicate his essential goodness. He struggled throughout his literary life to find a form of writing that would be up to the task. He moved from the essay, to the novel, to autobiography, finally settling on Reverie, the least constrained form of them all. Even still, it is not free enough. Rousseau must "write" on a walk or while falling asleep, taking pen to paper only after everything has already been written in his mind. (C, i:114; v:95) In the *Confessions*, Rousseau had made an attempt to communicate his goodness by laying himself bare, imperfections and all, so as to contrast himself to those vain autobiographers who, consumed by

amour propre, seek to ingratiate themselves or elevate themselves in the minds of their audience. As Rousseau discovered after the publication of his *Confessions*, the unmediated presentation of one's true self cannot be achieved in writing. By the time he composed the *Reveries*, Rousseau had given up on the public defense of his soul but was willing, if only for his own enjoyment, to make one last attempt at depicting natural goodness in writing. The *Reveries* is Rousseau's final attempt, after all else has failed, to close the gap between lived experience and illocution.

It is clear that the standard means of communication are not up to the task, and it may even be that language itself cannot do it. Language, if it is effective at all, is effective through its evocations rather than the plain sense of its terms. Rousseau shocks, persuades, and moves with language but does not attempt to convince. Rousseau's reveries become ecstatic or sublime through the addition of "charming images" that "enliven" what could originally be "abstract and monotonous." (R, i:1049; viii:48) This is another way that reverie is antithetical to argument—the former "relaxes" and "amuses," while the latter is "painful" and "charmless." (R, i:1062; viii:58)

Some things, such as the beauty of nature or the expansiveness of the soul, cannot be depicted in ordinary language; only art or poetry will suffice—Raymond says poetry is the language of reverie,¹⁰ but it could just as easily be music, literature, or painting. Art speaks through the heart, as does reverie, to evoke truths that cannot be communicated any other way.¹¹ The truths Rousseau was most interested in communicating—the "truths that pertain to human happiness"—cannot be communicated through ordinary, discursive language. Art can capture them, but language cannot, unless language is mixed melodiously such that it speaks to the heart in conjunction with the mind, rather than to the mind alone.¹² Reverie, then, is a new art form and a new form of philosophy—a synthesis of the two perhaps—the result of a judicious mixture of philosophy and poetry. Reverie, like art, allows us to squeeze more out of our experiences—to experience them twice, for one, but also to experience a sublimity, an extension of one's being not communicable in words but revealed by art, poetry, song, and, now, Reverie.

II. Reverie and Rousseau's Ethics of Truthseeking

Reverie, in and of itself, will not always elicit our most noble sentiments.¹³ Like reason and religion, reverie can be either a path toward truth or a path toward corruption. It will not lead to truth if our nature is not good, if our thoughts are not attuned, or if they are systematic, strategic, or too focused. Reveries must be detached from the corrupting influences of modern society; they must be unstructured; and they must be directed inward in order to access natural goodness. Otherwise, they will merely reflect the prejudices that result from inflamed *amour propre*. In order for reverie to facilitate

truthseeking, the subject—the *promeneur*—must adhere as closely as possible to the four principles of truthseeking described in the previous chapter.

i. Utility

For Rousseau, the decision to write is not something to be undertaken lightly; it is, in fact, something to be avoided, except when careful introspection reveals it to be justified. This justification is present only when writing is undertaken in response to an urgent, authentic necessity. The *Reveries* was made necessary, in Rousseau's view, by a conspiracy against him, which had driven him into solitude and left him with no alternative but to find a form of happiness that did not depend on society. He documented his reveries not for publication, but so that he could return to them again and again for personal solace and recall in reading them “the delight I enjoy in writing them.” (R, i.1001; viii:8) In reverie, Rousseau found what he had long desired—relief for his tortured soul—but, more than that, he discovered a path to otherwise inaccessible truths. For Rousseau, reverie supplanted social life (as a path toward happiness) and philosophy (as a path toward understanding).

Like everything else in his philosophical system, Rousseau evaluated reverie by its utility. When pushed for a philosophical defense of his principles, Rousseau did not hesitate to concede his beliefs were more a reflection of the needs of his soul than they were a consequence of philosophical analysis.¹⁴ Through reverie, Rousseau came closer to natural goodness than social life or philosophy had ever taken him, and, for him, that was enough.

Because it purges from consciousness everything that does not bear on human happiness, reverie allows its subject to experience the pure sentiment of existence, to engage with the world in a way that ensures the integrity of our ideas. In reverie, consciousness hears nature's voice, which instructs it in the “sublime science of simple souls” and only in that science. It is limited, in other words, to the truths that “pertain to human happiness.” In this state of formless attunement, consciousness is far removed from the harmful effects of *amour propre*. To know and to become together in the pure sentiment of existence. We simultaneously understand and experience natural goodness—a new *communion des coeurs* in the form of a communion with nature.

Rousseau opposed the *promeneur*'s state of mind to that of his critics, who he described as “automatons” whose actions are determined simplistically and mechanistically by *amour propre*. (R, i:1078; viii:72) Reverie's clearing enables a similarly unmediated experience, in which the subject is consumed not by *amour propre* but by *amour de soi*, experienced in this context as the simultaneous love of oneself and love of nature. Both the *amour propre* of Rousseau's despised “automatons” and the *amour de soi* of his revered walker strip away the filters on consciousness, releasing the mind to immediate sensation, the empire of opinion on the one hand and the “sentiment

of existence" on the other. Reverie is the activity of the mind unencumbered by the constraints of *amour propre*, convention, even of language. It is the underside of our conscious conception of ourselves, the realization of an ambition articulated much earlier by Rousseau in his literary career: to "strip man . . . of all the artificial faculties that he could have acquired only by prolonged progress . . . to see an animal . . . most advantageously organized of all." (*DI*, iii:134; iii:20)

Reverie is the conscious activity of a mind attuned exclusively and entirely to the "truths that pertain to human happiness." (Rousseau was nothing if not aspirational.) The truths accessed in reverie are *lived* as much as they are *thought* by a subject attuned completely to the immediacy of her own existence. For this reason, reverie must be understood as both an ontological and an epistemological phenomenon. For Rousseau, how we think depends on how we live. Books are only as good as their authors, actions only as good as their agents, the arts and sciences only as good as the artists and scientists who are their practitioners. Rousseau was more concerned with the quality of the person than he was with the quality of his or her argument, confident that the quality of the person largely determines the quality of the argument.¹⁵ Truth, as Rousseau understood it, was to be found in the relation of self and nature, not *via* an abstract, impersonal study of it. Reverie constituted for Rousseau a pathway to this relationship. It situates us auspiciously with regard to both happiness and understanding. Though reverie cannot guarantee the recuperation of natural felicity or ensure the goodness of our ideas, it nevertheless constitutes a vast improvement over society (as a path to happiness) and philosophy (as a path to understanding).

For many, the radical opening of consciousness to whatever wishes to enter will be fraught with peril. Hobbesians, Kantians, Hegelians, and their contemporary adherents all trust reason to secure justice and to manage the threats to justice posed by the passions. Rousseau departed from most of modern thought in placing his faith not in reason but in the natural goodness of human beings. It was this belief in natural goodness that allowed Rousseau to embrace reverie wholeheartedly as a pathway to happiness and justice. For Rousseau, it was the rationalization of sentiment that was the source of ills, not sentiment itself. Sentiment can be harmful, of course, but only if it has been corrupted by outside influences. So long as our relationship to sentiment is unmediated, it can be trusted, whereas reflection, by virtue of its origin in comparison, is immediately suspect. Reverie abstains from reason and all the other constraints on consciousness so that sentiments are felt as intimately as possible. This helps us to make sense of Rousseau's claim in the first *Discourse* that, all things considered, the savage was better than we are. For all of its many splendors, and in spite of its capacity to enlighten, abstract reason has done humanity more harm than good. The more sophisticated one's worldview, the more onerous the task of accessing the truths most essential to human flourishing. Whereas the savage experienced an innate, immediate aversion at the sight of suffering, our

sophistication makes us indifferent: “perish if you will, I am safe,” says the philosopher of the second *Discourse*, when he encounters a fellow human being in pain.” (iii:156; iii:37)

It was for this reason, Rousseau felt, that his tormentors, in spite of their ill intent, had actually done him a favor by forcing him into exile. (R, i:1002–1003; viii:9) Alone, Rousseau was finally able to purge himself of everything external—to turn inward and orient himself introspectively (in communion with nature and his own natural goodness) rather than intersubjectively (in the opinion of others). This experience of escape or withdrawal enabled a pure-hearted return to humanity and a newfound concern for the welfare of others. Amidst his persecution, Rousseau described himself as having achieved an enlightened serenity.

Everything is finished for me on earth. People can no longer do good or evil to me here. I have nothing more to hope for or to fear in this world and here I am tranquil at the bottom of the abyss, a poor unfortunate mortal, but unperturbed, like God Himself. (R, i:999; viii:6)

In reverie, Rousseau learned something unexpected: not just that he himself did not need people, but that human beings, in freeing themselves of a concern for the opinion of others, also put themselves in position to experience an authentic *communion des coeurs*. The motivational force that Rousseau had earlier associated with patriotism alone became available to him in cosmopolitan form amidst his solitary reveries, which he described as “active, ardent, laborious, and indefatigable.” (D, i:817; i:122)

Nothing was more necessary for Rousseau than to preserve a love of humanity, even in the midst of his deepest solitude.

As long as men were my brothers, I made plans of earthly felicity for myself. These plans always being relative to the whole, I could be happy only through public felicity; and the idea of private happiness never touched my heart until I saw my brothers seeking theirs only in my misery. Then it became necessary to flee them so as not to hate them. Then, seeking refuge in mother nature, I sought in her arms to shield myself against the attacks of her children. (R, i:1066; viii:63)

The ill-intentioned but ultimately serendipitous banishment of Rousseau from European intellectual circles allowed him not only to experience a previously unimagined ecstasy but also to produce fundamental insights into justice and morality. Totally apart from society, Rousseau believed he had deepened his understanding of the truths that make for its flourishing. In a corrupt era, the only short-term option is to be alone. We are alone in society without knowing it; in solitude, by contrast, we are alone deliberately, and *that* experience enables us to be together in the authentic way that Rousseau envisioned in his political writings.

Reverie returned Rousseau to himself, to his essence, which was for him the universal essence of all humankind. And that is why it enabled the fellowship that had eluded him for so much of his life. Modern corruption makes a meeting of the minds unlikely in social life, but a *communion des coeurs* is still possible, it turns out, if we orient ourselves away from society and turn inward toward natural goodness.

ii. Autonomy

Rousseau believed that the Parisian intellectual elite had conspired against him, driven by jealousy and inflamed *amour propre*. Though he had attempted to refute their charges in the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues*, by the time he composed the *Reveries*, he had given up. He had come to realize that, in those earlier writings, he was still concerned for how he appeared in the eyes of others, which is to say that he was himself not yet free of *amour propre*.¹⁶ In the *Reveries*, Rousseau decided that he would cease trying to convince those who would not allow themselves to be convinced.¹⁷ He claimed to put no credence in the charges of his tormentors. They are “automatons,” so alienated from themselves, so removed from natural goodness, that they respond only to the most superficial of external stimuli. This is further than Rousseau had gone in his critique of modernity. Modern men and women had, in his view, always been driven by external stimuli, but here Rousseau suggested that they are driven by nothing else—they were now as far as one can possibly be from the pure sentiment of existence. They were now worse than just corrupt; they had ceased to be human.

Where his enemies were automatons, driven only by external influences, Rousseau committed himself, in the *Reveries*, to be autonomous, following only the inner voice of the *sentiment intérieur*. In practice, this requires a negative ethics, a closing of the passages through which vice enters. Before reverie can take hold of us (which is precisely what it does—*take hold of us*), we must create a space for it to enter, and, to do that, we must purge ourselves of the corrupting influences that close our minds and hearts to the sentiment of existence. Rousseau refers this process with the phrase “*se circonscrire*,” by which he meant separating oneself from society so as to escape the influence of *amour propre*.¹⁸ The prevalence of *amour propre* is the principal barrier to Rousseauean reverie, which means that escaping or transcending *amour propre* is a precondition for experiencing the kind of reverie Rousseau recommends.

The precondition for reverie is the silencing of *amour propre*, which, in turn, allows the voice of nature to be heard. The *philosophes*, who lurk in the background (and sometimes the foreground) of Rousseau’s text, do not hear nature’s voice, because they are too busily and too noisily imposing themselves on the world. Reverie is a largely passive activity, one that requires us to stop talking so that we can begin listening to nature’s voice. Public philosophers do not listen because they are driven by *amour propre*.

and are consequently concerned only to publicize their views. They hear only what they want to hear—just enough to attack the ideas of their competitors and enhance the public reception of their own. These ostensible purveyors of truth are actually manufacturers of lies, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, but mostly they are too consumed with *amour propre* to bother worrying about it. They have simply lost track of the difference. In the hands of what Rousseau calls the “genuine philosopher,” philosophy could be as instructive as reverie, but, in the hands of the public philosophers who dominated European intellectual life, philosophy was useful only for questioning and criticizing.

Public life in general, and the publication of one’s ideas in particular, leads toward a posture of perpetual skepticism, according to which conviction and faith are simply naïve. The publicizing of ideas corrupts them, as authors disregard humanity’s true needs in favor of personal reputation and glory. Rousseau, by contrast, wanted always to affirm truths that make for human happiness. This work, embodied most clearly in the vicar’s profession of faith, requires a return to the simple voice of conscience, which instructs us in the sublime science of simple souls. Affirmation of these truths lacks controversy and so fails to inspire the public excitement and voyeurism that flow from attacks on society’s sacred cows. However, the “moral order” that follows from what Rousseau called the “vain arguments” of his skeptical contemporaries offers no resources for living and no hope when dying. (*R*, i:1019; viii:23)¹⁹

If publication or publicizing one’s ideas tends to corrupt them, then it follows that a precondition of reverie would be withdrawal from public life. Before Rousseau can enter into reverie, he must enter into solitude—intellectually, physically, and psychologically—even if he was, in actuality, rarely completely alone.²⁰ Rousseau’s reveries were solitary in the most relevant sense, namely that they were experienced without regard for appearances, opinion or *amour propre*. “By sequestering [him] to make [him] miserable,” Rousseau realized, his tormentors “had done more for [his] happiness than [he] had ever been able to do.” (*R*, i:1015; viii:20) At the outset of the *Reveries*, Rousseau declared flatly, “Everything external is henceforth foreign to me.” (i:999; viii:6)

Prior to the composition of the *Reveries*, Rousseau tells us, he had still thought well of people, or at least of some people and so could not be indifferent to their opinion. (*R*, i:1077; viii:71) At this point in his life, Rousseau, if we take him at his word, no longer had any regard for the opinion of others. He was no longer trying to convince anyone of anything. Rousseau admits that, in writing the *Confessions* and the *Dialogues*, he had been driven by the goal of diffusing the *complot* (plot). Here, in the *Reveries*, he has finally given up: “With this work, the same worry no longer torments me. . . . The desire to be better understood by men has been extinguished in my heart.” (*R*, i:1001; viii:8) Having rid himself of this agenda, Rousseau looked around and found nothing left to pursue. Here, after he let go

completely, enlightenment finally awaited and the pure sentiment of existence filled his soul. Only at that point could Rousseau write without ulterior agenda; only then could he allow the world to speak to him without imposing his will on it. He would from that point on speak from his heart, without filter or decoration and to himself alone.

Reverie appealed to Rousseau because it creates a space for consciousness to escape the societal noise that generally consumes it. It allows its subject to free herself from the forces that structure modern consciousness. Reverie requires no specialized expertise or training: “it is necessary only to love pleasure.” (*R*, i:1063; v:59) The idea is to allow one’s thoughts to coalesce and combine on their own, without the presuppositions of a philosophical system, so that the universal voice of conscience can be heard once again. This reverses conventional modes of theoretical reflection, which begin with a criterion or method and then derive truths within those parameters. There is no structure or framework governing reverie. A form, if one emerges at all, emerges out of formlessness.

Rousseau called the *Reveries* a “shapeless diary;” wholeness remained the objective, as it always was for Rousseau, but, in reverie, wholeness must take form out of formlessness. (*R*, i:1000; viii:7) We arrive at wholeness when we get out of our own way; when we stop striving for it and start working against those things that obstruct it. Truthseeking depends much more on removing obstacles than on acquiring knowledge; it means clearing a space rather than charging ahead. Nature grants us everything we need, but, having become so enamored of ambition and acquisition, we cannot stop ourselves from pursuing increasingly sophisticated appetites, ideas, and possessions. We work tirelessly for a happiness that only recedes with each new honor or possession. Meanwhile, the simple and essential “truths that pertain to human happiness” become ever more opaque. These truths are not reborn or reconstituted; rather, in reverie, they resurface when we purge ourselves of the divisive influence of *amour propre*.

Rousseauian reverie is best understood as the state of consciousness that results from purging the mind of all external influences. It is the *positive* consequence of the *negative* process of creating a clearing in consciousness, so that natural goodness may enter. Rousseau uses the term *amour propre* to capture the external influences that generally structure our thinking in society. The term encompasses not only the more ordinary vain ambitions that we tend to associate with love of oneself but also sophisticated intellectual systems. Reverie is, then, the positive consequence of clearing the mind of *amour propre*. It is a sublime state of consciousness, which Rousseau accesses by circumscribing himself or purging his consciousness of all externally imposed constraints. While it was never possible for Rousseau to be completely certain that he had accomplished this, that is that he had fully circumscribed himself—he was confident that it could be done if he allowed “images [to be] traced in the brain . . . without the collaboration of

the will." (*D*, i:845; i:143) Early in the *Reveries*, Rousseau writes, "I will be content to keep a record of the measurements without seeking [of my soul] without attempting to reduce them to a system." (*R*, i:1001; viii:7–8) In so doing, Rousseau believed himself to have rediscovered the "eternal truths admitted at all times by all wise men," (*R*, i:1021; viii:25) to which he dedicated his life's work, and the *sentiment pur de l'existence*, which he believed to be the basis for human happiness.

The "moi" is lost in reverie, as Marcel Raymond puts it.²¹ We might add that it is lost so that it can be recovered in its primordial state. Natural goodness, however undermined by society, persists in us, if only in the deepest recesses of our hearts. Reverie is an escape from society, which creates the possibility for a return to oneself. We must lose our public self, "*s'abandonner*" (abandon oneself), as Rousseau puts it frequently in the *Reveries*, so as to return to our natural self. When we do, we exist in our fullness and are in need of nothing, simultaneously subject and object. Here, we have become "like God," (*R*, i:1047; viii:46) but only by losing ourselves, leaving ourselves, and thereby extending ourselves such that we encompass the world and become one with it.

This unity or wholeness is, in Rousseau's view, the essence of our being. His view contrasts sharply with the dualism of the Cartesian *cogito*, as well as with Locke's and Condillac's empiricism, both of which presuppose an autonomous agent, who can be conceptualized, theoretically at least, as distinct from the world she observes. In order to truly know, the Cartesian subject must first do what Rousseau considered to be both impossible and counterproductive. Descartes writes:

Thus I will assume that everything I see is false. I believe that, among the things that a deceptive memory represents, nothing ever existed; I have no senses at all; body, shape, extension, motion, and place are unreal. Perhaps that is all there is, that there is nothing certain.²²

Like Rousseau's solitary walker, the Cartesian subject creates a clearing in consciousness so that understanding is possible. However, whereas Descartes' subject clears her mind of *any* influence emanating from the world she observes, Rousseau's walker clears her mind of all *artificial* influences, so that nature's voice may be heard. Consciousness must be cleared of social influences (*amour propre*) so that the pure sentiment of existence (*amour de soi*) may be experienced. For Rousseau, to doubt everything is to turn against oneself, against one's essential humanity. I believe this explains why, despite his admiration for Descartes' philosophy, Rousseau was ready to assert that Descartes "believed he was going toward the truth and did not find anything but lies." (*ML*, i:1095; xii:186) In Rousseau's view, Descartes had misunderstood the nature of autonomy. He had wrongly imagined an epistemological moment of autonomy, in which consciousness could detach

itself completely from the world and thereby gain an objective perspective on it. This moment of putative neutrality, in which consciousness was cleared of all convictions, was an inhuman moment for Rousseau. For Rousseau, true autonomy is not achieved through the suspension of *all* belief but rather through the purging of prejudice so that we can sense the essential principles inscribed in our consciousness and in nature's order.

Rousseau conceived of human beings as human only in conjunction with the world; in attempting to detach ourselves from our context, we assume a false position of privilege that only corrupts and confuses our understanding of the world. Consciousness must be understood against the background from which it emerges. Knowledge becomes possible only when subjects are in the right place—physically, mentally, and psychologically. A retreat from society in all its various corrupting manifestations and a return to nature in all its many ennobling manifestations constitute prerequisites for reverie. For Descartes, we can create a clearing in consciousness anywhere at any time, as long as we have a will to do so. No physical escape is necessary to initiate an inquiry, because the question of truth is a purely epistemological one for Descartes. For Rousseau, by contrast, truth is an ontological matter as much as an epistemological one.

Truth will be reclaimed, in Rousseau's view, after we remove ourselves from society and reconnect with nature. We achieve real autonomy not through detached reasoning but through the proper relation of self and nature. Truth is a state of mind, for Rousseau, in which consciousness simultaneously contemplates itself and its context. When we say with Descartes, “I exist,” Rousseau insists that the “I” always already implies existence. A human being *is* existence, which means that, for Rousseau, the Cartesian distinction between *cogito* and *sum* is false. That is to say, it does not exist as the philosophical problem that Descartes imagines it to be. Descartes' method imagines human beings apart from the world they inhabit. For Rousseau, a human being is not human at all when detached from the world. Truthseeking requires us to immerse ourselves more fully into the world rather than aspire to a standpoint that transcends it. Descartes found only lies, Rousseau believed, because in striving for a privileged, detached standpoint, he only moved further from the truth.

Existence precedes everything else in Rousseau's system, and reverie offers a medium by which social men and women can recuperate the sentiment of existence, which is the sentiment that allows us to access that part of our soul that is human being, nature, and God all at once. In reverie, there is no distinction between love of oneself, love of God, and love of His creations—they all merge into one. We reach the elusive point where the soul can rest, as imagined by Plato and Aristotle. Here, we finally experience the pure sentiment of existence, so immediately present for natural man, but so foreign to us.

All of this begins to sound too perfect, and Rousseau certainly was accused of Panglossian optimism about the goodness of existence.²³ In response,

Rousseau felt compelled to concede that he may have failed to answer the claims of his critics. What is this voice of nature? How can we know that it is not a delusion or, as Descartes wondered, “some God . . . who puts these very thoughts into me?”²⁴ Rousseau tacitly admitted that his adversaries had made compelling arguments against his assertions of natural goodness. (*R*, i:1021–2; viii:25) They had offered good criticisms. The problem with their arguments, in Rousseau’s view, was that they were good *only* for criticizing; for anyone in need of solace and affirmation, which is to say the whole of humanity, they were of little use. Rousseau seemed to concede that his belief in the goodness of existence was primitive, even naïve. In the end, he was not particularly concerned about whether he had refuted his critics. He was content, as he put it in a letter to Sophie d’Houdetot, that his readers “feel” (*sentir*) that he is right. (*ML*, i:1109; xii:196) There is indeed a God putting thoughts into our mind, as Descartes had wondered, but we need not doubt the goodness of these thoughts; instead, we ought to clear our minds so that those thoughts might finally be apprehended.

iii. Immediacy

The call comes *from* me and yet *from beyond me*.²⁵

Martin Heidegger

Reverie was not the only medium Rousseau employed as a pathway toward truth. In fact, Rousseau may have embraced and employed more media than any major thinker in history. In addition to music, confession, investigation, moral education, natural religion, reason, and poetry, among others, Rousseau valued reverie as a pathway to truth. Reverie became Rousseau’s preferred state of consciousness late in his life because it was the least mediated, the least constrained. It was the most spontaneous, direct expression of what he regarded as his pure intentions. Reverie is the unfiltered, undirected expression of the heart, unencumbered by language, systems, prejudices, customs, or any of the other influences that mediate consciousness in society.

So frequently contrasted with the Cartesian *cogito*, Rousseauian reverie is equally illuminated through a juxtaposition with Heidegger’s *Dasein*. Reverie is both a framework for knowing and a mode of being; Descartes’ *cogito* provides an interesting point of contrast for an investigation into the epistemology of reverie, while Heidegger’s *Dasein* is a useful reference point for an ontology of reverie. Reverie is ultimately a disposition toward experience, a way of experiencing. It is a way of letting oneself go, of “Being-in-the-World,” to use Heidegger’s term, as opposed to setting oneself apart from it. In reverie, we withdraw from the artifice of the social world in order to experience the authenticity of nature. We do not ask ourselves whether we are happy, sad, angry, or anything else; the thought never occurs to us,

as our conscious activity is directed solely by nature and is completely in harmony with it. Immersed in reverie, we recuperate the harmony of the savage, fully integrated with the world.

It is reverie's immediacy that distinguishes it phenomenologically from the mediation of language and reason. The more mediated one's mode of engaging the world, the more susceptible it is to *amour propre*. The more unmediated one's consciousness, the more open it is to the voice of nature and, therefore, the more inclined it will be to a love of nature and of one's fellow human beings. Reverie facilitated for Rousseau a personal return from the exile of *amour propre* and allowed him to overcome the alienation he had experienced in response to the *complot*. Despite his best efforts, language and reason proved too vulnerable to infiltration by *amour propre*; Rousseau could not recuperate the sentiments that would enable of love of humanity until he withdrew from language and reason and turned to reverie. Reverie constituted for Rousseau a viable path to a concern for others at a time when corruption made him skeptical about other paths toward this end.

Reverie begins with an initial dissolution of consciousness so that it might be reconstituted under the direction of nature. Consciousness is initially unfocused but ultimately becomes highly attuned or, to use a Heideggerian term, "resolute." Reverie is formless at its origin, not for the sake of formlessness, but so that the heart or soul can enter and give it shape. Truth, as Rousseau understood it, lies outside the conscious mind, beyond the self, or, more accurately, within the self, the universal self that is at the bottom of us all, buried so deep that it can rarely be revived. We must leave ourselves—take leave of the self—and seek out natural goodness, but it is only the conscious self that we must leave, so that we might return to the soul or the heart, which is to say, to our creator. Natural goodness lies within, and reverie is the medium by which that natural goodness can enter into the conscious activity of the mind. In reverie, the heart takes the mind where it wants it to go. We must only get out of our own way and allow the heart to guide us, and yet this occurs only very rarely among modern men and women, so infatuated by rationality and the stranglehold it wields over sentiment.

In the *Reveries*, Rousseau describes coming to the conclusion that it is better to follow "the dictaments of my conscience" over the "insights of my reason." (i:1028; viii:31) To put it in philosophical terms, it is rational to follow one's heart—even if others, speaking from some other place, can pile up reasons to the contrary. Rousseau's argument is not that we should never reason; his argument is that reason cannot be its own judge. Reason is not the measure of all things—sentiment is. We know we have reasoned well when our sentiments tell us that we have done so with the right intentions. This is obviously a departure from most accounts of valid reasoning, which tend to exclude or at least minimize the influence of sentiment.

In reverie, by contrast, our sentiments are to be amplified so as to ensure the integrity of our ideas. Like reason, faith, and all other human faculties, sentiment can be good or bad, can tend toward goodness or corruption

and can be born of either one. Frequently, Rousseau praised feeling and sentiment. At other times, he praised those who reason in the silence of the passions. “Sentiment” and “inclination” were Rousseau’s terms for those emotions that tend toward goodness, “passion” his term for those that corrupt. Inclinations are innocent; passions are dangerous. Rousseau calls “inclinations” those drives that he associates with *amour de soi* and “passions” those drives that he associates with *amour propre*. The fount of truth is not the *cogito*, as Descartes believed, but those sentiments associated with *amour de soi*. Reason functions best in the silence of the passions, but we should hasten to add that it would function very poorly in complete silence. Cold or abstract reason leads inexorably to skepticism. Knowledge of the truths that make for human happiness must be accessed through the heart.

Whereas Descartes and the *philosophes* assumed that what we know, we know through thinking, Rousseau believed that what we know, we know through feeling.²⁶ It is reasonable, therefore, to attune oneself to one’s sentiments. On some level, Rousseau believed this whole question to be moot. This is because, even when we attempt to exclude sentiment, we will be guided by the heart’s secret desires.²⁷ Corruption is not the result of allowing inclination to influence our calculation of our duties; it is rather the result of refusing to follow the heart and acting instead in the name of reason (ostensibly) but actually in the service of some other base or selfish inclination. Reverie is the best means Rousseau could find for eliciting truths that reason alone cannot grasp. Reverie, then, is not irrational, but it is anti-rationalist, inasmuch as it rejects the notion that reason is the sole or even the best path to moral truth. The heart speaks in reverie, rather than the mind, though the mind may (and should) listen.

Rousseau embraced formlessness as the alternative to the systematic thinking he regarded as prejudicial to modern forms of reasoning. Formlessness for Rousseau denotes the absence of a predetermined structure or destination. But Rousseau recognized that the mind, however open to its destination, is never free of constraint. It is always directed *by* something. The goal of Rousseauian reverie is to make nature, both human and non-human, the primary influence on consciousness. Botany, which holds a position of prominence in the text, embodies this kind of formlessness. One may study plants with the specific aim of deploying them for their use or potential profitability, or one may study them without regard for their instrumental uses.²⁸ In order to illustrate this point, Rousseau drew a distinction between botany and pharmacology. The botanist, in Rousseau’s construction, allows nature to speak for itself, while the pharmacologist makes it conform to a predetermined aim. The pharmacologist imposes her will on nature rather than allowing nature to structure her will. Pharmacologists are not interested in understanding nature, much less communing with it. They suffer from the pathology Rousseau diagnosed in his first *Discourse*: attempting to impose an externally derived agenda on nature’s order. Rather than revealing nature’s order, pharmacology operationalizes it in service to

an ulterior purpose. Pharmacology applies a system to the study of nature, while botany provides an opening into which nature may present itself. The botanist studies plants in an initially open, undetermined way, so that nature itself is responsible for the result.²⁹ The pharmacologist, by contrast, is incapable of opening her mind to the pleasures nature makes available to those willing to listen.

Botanists walk in the sense of “going for a walk” (*se promèner*), while pharmacologists walk in the sense of the French *marcher*. Whereas the *marcheur* walks *toward* a predetermined destination, *for* a predetermined purpose, the *promeneur* simply walks to walk. *Se promèner* can be translated as “to stroll” and suggests wandering, in the way the mind might wander when engaged in reverie. The *promeneur* aims for aimlessness. This kind of walking is the action that most clearly facilitates reverie in Rousseau’s text. Walking (*se promèner*) is movement but not necessarily movement *toward* anything in particular. In fact, it is precisely movement toward nothing in particular. *Se promèner* suggests wandering of the body, while reverie denotes the wandering of the mind. There is no aim, except to escape, to have no aim. Not having an aim becomes a goal; it is the indication of a mind prepared to hear the voice of nature.

This experience resembles Eastern meditation, but, whereas Eastern meditation is generally initiated purposefully by an active subject, reverie originates from the outside. In this sense, reverie is closer to dreaming (*rêver*), as the agent’s role in both dreaming and reverie is to open consciousness to the inner voice or voice of nature. Once that clearing away has been accomplished, reverie is a largely passive activity. Bachelard calls it “tranquilizing,” but that is not quite right.³⁰ Reverie certainly facilitates tranquility, but far from tranquilizing, it alerts its subject, attuning her senses to the object of reverie. Reverie is opposed both to dreaming and to reasoning. Dreaming (*rêver*) shares reverie’s openness but dreams are too diffuse; in reverie, consciousness is fully present. Reasoning shares reverie’s focus, but is generally too structured or systematic for Rousseau. In reverie, Rousseau believed he could combine reason’s focus with the passivity and openness of dreaming to produce a unique state of mind, simultaneously open and highly attuned. (R, i:1087; viii:80)³¹

The object of reverie must command attention without consuming it. Botany does this, so long as we steer clear of pharmacology and allow nature itself to drive our inquiry, doing nothing more than inhabiting her order, while stopping at points of interest along the way. This element disappears once we assume an ulterior motive, such as writing a book on plants or putting them to use. What Rousseau wants is to commune with nature, to become one with it, but, in order to do so, he needs an entry point that will stimulate a reverie without overwhelming it.

So, while consciousness does not select its objects in reverie, it must *pre-select* them to some extent. That is, it must situate itself in a place where those objects permitted to enter into consciousness will evoke the right

sentiments. If the subject is able to escape society, to make an inward turn, simultaneously toward herself and toward nature, then she will enjoy the unique ecstasy of reverie, born of a pure heart. Reverie is “the highest pleasure, compared to which there is nothing greater in this life or in the other.” (CC, to Victor Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau, 31 January 1767, 5695, xxxii:82) Rousseau considered this the only path to happiness that remained to him late in his life, having been denied all else by his forced exile. In reverie, Rousseau had discovered a form of happiness that his persecutors could never experience, caught up as they were in the trappings of society. Immersed in reverie, Rousseau imagined himself to be self-sufficient; he had found the elusive resting place for the soul in the pure sentiment of existence. Most people have enjoyed this sublime ecstasy but only fleetingly and incompletely. Through reverie, Rousseau was able to linger in these ecstatic moments.

Rousseauean reverie offers a viable alternative to society as a mode of being, one that may even supersede life in a virtuous republic. But, more than that, reverie offers an alternative to philosophy as a mode of inquiry. This came as something of a surprise to Rousseau. He turned to reverie for psychological solace when he felt it was all that remained to him; but reverie ended up surprising Rousseau by opening up an authentic, reliable pathway to truth.

Rousseau is able to enter into reverie, he tells us, by “no longer imagining” and “thinking even less”—by indulging his “lively temperament which saves [him] from listless and melancholy apathy.” (R, i:1066; viii:62) By refraining from active intellectual activity, Rousseau is able to open his consciousness to “the objects which immediately surround [him].” (R, i:1066; viii:62) Reverie is unfocused but is not a void; it is not a purging of all thought. It is stimulated by something, upon which it reflects freely, without ever being consumed by the object of attention, such that the reverie itself is punctured and we are forced to attend more consciously to the object that originally set the reverie in motion. Reverie lies between vacuousness and concentration. Veer too far in one direction, and we are dulled to experience; veer in the opposite direction, and we become consumed by it. Reverie requires a stimulus but not one that consumes us or requires focused attention. Neither total calm nor frenzy will do; without movement there is lethargy, but with too much, we are drawn out of our inner self. (R, i:1047–8; viii:47) The goal is to be conscious of one’s existence while forgetting one’s troubles.

Reverie can be understood as a midway point between reason and inclination or, more specifically, as the state of mind that occurs when we allow inclination to drive reason. It is the consequence of the mind’s decision to listen to the heart, which is to say to our true self, the authentic voice of nature. Reverie is therefore the overcoming of hypocrisy, the remedy for the social defect Rousseau diagnosed in the first *Discourse*—that men and women in modern society appear to be the opposite of what they actually are. (DAS, iii:8; ii:6) Philosophers might extol virtue in their writings

without possessing it themselves, but if our reveries are good, then we ourselves must also be good, since reverie is the unfiltered outpouring of the heart. Society would be far better off if, instead of publishing works of philosophy, writers published accounts of the reveries from which their philosophy originated. Whereas philosophy masks hypocrisy, reverie is honest. Reverie is the activity of the mind freed of custom, language, system, and *amour propre*—it is thinking in response to authentic and essential needs without regard for how we appear to others. “Let us not be surprised, therefore, to see arrogant and vain philosophy lose itself in reverie and the greatest geniuses exhaust themselves in childishness.”³²

The substance of Rousseauian reverie, then, is natural goodness. What we come to know through reverie is ourselves—our true self or natural self—that which it is most important to know but also most difficult to know. In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau wondered, following Buffon, whether “we do not know better everything that is not ourselves.” (*DI*, iii:195; iii:68) In that text, Rousseau argued that every advance we believe we have made toward self-knowledge has actually left us less auspiciously positioned than we had been previously. Reverie, by contrast, can work where philosophy has not, because it acknowledges the necessity of first forgetting everything. In pure reverie, the ego is absent. Reverie is sensing without willing. Willing may come later, ideally formulated on the basis of truths derived from reverie. Something analogous occurs in Rousseau’s political theory, in which the substance of the general will is formulated well before it is expressed. The willing aspect of popular sovereignty comes second, after citizens have been conditioned to will generally through civic education, public festivals and civil religion. All of these experiences, reverie included, have in common the immersion of the self to the point where the boundaries between oneself and the world become blurred.

iv. Simplicity

As indicated in chapter one, it is essential to anchor any reading of Rousseau to what he considered his fundamental principle: “Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man.” (*E*, xiii:161; iv:245) In the context of eighteenth-century theories of social and intellectual progress, Rousseau’s heuristic was altogether revolutionary. For moral guidance, Rousseau turned to the savage; for even more basic truths, he turned to nature. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau applied this principle by attempting to strip from consciousness everything that has fallen into the hands of human beings. The goal in reverie, he writes, is to forget oneself, (*R*, i:1065; viii:61) though we could just as easily describe it as remembering oneself or returning to oneself. We must forget our public self in order to discover our true self, our essence or essential goodness, which is “fused” (*fondre*) with the whole of nature. (*R*, i:1065; viii:61)

The substance of reverie is indeterminate, unknown—anything can come out of it. It is accessed by the removal of obstacles, and it is defined negatively as well, by what is absent. Like education, reverie is about preventing harmful passions from entering our souls and in “keeping tightly shut the passages through which they enter.” Truthseeking is like education and political freedom in Rousseau’s system: it is a negative endeavor. The *promeneur* clears things away. He does not build an edifice but rather creates a clearing, so that the heart can direct him, unencumbered to that which it does not take anything extra to experience—the sentiment of existence.

Rousseau likened this experience to the flow of water, which also goes where nature intends, moving in unpredictable directions, responding to variations in the environment. This unstructured willingness to listen contrasted sharply, in Rousseau’s view, with the systematic, structured philosophical dogmatism that Rousseau ascribed to his intellectual contemporaries. While the subject of solitary reverie allows her thoughts to flow like water, philosophers impose their will on the world; they are akin to hydraulic engineers, beating back nature with a network of dams and canals. Reverie frees images, observations, and thoughts from the artificial constraints of system, convention and vanity, leaving thoughts free to combine, diverge, and pool.

This embrace of formlessness set Rousseau apart from his contemporaries, for whom reverie was a pejorative term. It might be asserted, for example, that reverie’s formlessness leaves its substantive content indeterminate as well, tending just as frequently toward vice as it does toward virtue. According to this argument, if reverie is fundamentally open, the subject will not impose restrictions or filters on the substance of her reverie. Reverie will simply reflect the stimuli that enter into consciousness once the active intellect has been quieted. What assurance do we have that, left to its own devices, consciousness will not drift toward vanity or selfishness? Here we must recall what Rousseau called his “great principle”—original goodness—which provided a safety net—Richard Rorty would call it a “sky hook”—for the radical formlessness of reverie. Rousseau’s confidence in the substantive content of reverie comes from his faith in the goodness of the inner voice or voice of nature. The stimuli driving reverie will ideally be manifestations of this voice of nature, originating either from the outside or from the inside—from the subject’s heart or inner voice. Nature, for Rousseau, is fundamentally good, and that goodness exists deep within every human heart, even if accessing it has become a tall task. Once the active intellect is quieted, the stimuli driving reverie will be manifestations of the voice of nature, originating either from the outside (physical nature) or from the inside—from the subject’s heart or inner voice. It was in reverie that Rousseau believed that the heart could at last break free of the prejudices and constraints of convention and abstract reasoning. Form can here emerge out of formlessness, manifested in an open, pure love of existence, both physical and spiritual—a communion with humanity’s universal goodness. Reverie’s function is to create the opening consciousness needs

to recover its tranquility and, in so doing, reacquaint itself with the “truths that pertain to human happiness.” These basic truths are apprehended not through sophisticated philosophical systems or scientific investigation but by consulting one’s heart or inner voice.

As in Kantian pure reason, Rousseauean reverie requires the subject to abstract from external or heteronomous influences until only an honest voice sounds forth. Whereas for Kant this authentic voice was abstract reason, for Rousseau, it was sentiment or the “inner voice.” Rousseau described a simple voice, a “sublime science of simple souls” (which Kant, incidentally, credited with setting him straight). This voice speaks through the heart of every person, but it is scarcely heard by modern men and women, whose consciousness is consumed by vanity and personal ambition. Consequently, Rousseau saw himself in the *Reveries* as “another Columbus,” on a trail-blazing, metaphysical voyage into the human soul. (R, i:1071; viii:66) The difference was that Rousseau imagined himself to be exploring a lost world as opposed to a new one, a world that had once been sensed, always and immediately, but that had become almost entirely obscure.

Rousseau attributed his ability to blaze this trail to his unique proximity to natural goodness, which allowed him to reveal truths inaccessible to those of us who have been more thoroughly socialized. He imagined himself to be immune from the forces that have alienated the “civilized” world from the natural goodness that is common to all human beings but has, by accident of history, become obscure to most. Rousseau regarded himself as an exceptional human being and, at the same time, the paragon of humankind; he embodied natural goodness in a way the rest of us do not. This is the quality—Rousseau tells us again and again—that justified his decision to become an author, a decision that must never be taken without the most careful consideration. At this late stage in his career, Rousseau acknowledged that even he had not adequately consecrated himself to truth in his previous autobiographical writings. While his goodness had always ensured the integrity of his writings, Rousseau was only now in a position to speak completely openly and without agenda on the subject of self-knowledge. Previously, he knew only that he possessed natural goodness. In reverie, he realized precisely what natural goodness is. While in the *Discourses*, he had described its outward manifestations—*independence*, *innocence*, and *amour de soi*—in reverie, he came to understand its essence.

III. Reverie and Social Communion

In his autobiographical writings Rousseau depicted himself as driven, sometimes consumed, by a desire for communion. For the most part, it is communion with nature that Rousseau emphasized in the *Reveries*, but, never far from the surface, there is also a persistent desire for communion with other people. Rousseau was generally frustrated in his quest for social communion. As is frequently the case with moralists, Rousseau found it a challenge to find a community of people worthy of his lofty standards. Peasants,

Corsicans, and occasionally Genevans won Rousseau's endorsement at various times, but he was never personally able to make a home among a community of likeminded souls.³³ He was a lifelong itinerant, sometimes by choice, sometimes against his will. The flip side of Rousseau's condemnation of society was a desperate desire to belong to one. His social criticism is reminiscent of Montaigne's lament about friendship: "O, my friends, there is no friend." Montaigne's criticism of friendship expresses a simultaneous longing for it, just as Rousseau's disgust with and exile from society were born of his yearning for a society that would be worthy of his affection.

Rousseauian reverie begins with a withdrawal from, even a refusal of, political life. But Rousseau's revulsion for politics was a reflection not of indifference; it was rather a reflection of profound concern. Rousseau's reveries were directly inspired by his exile from civic life—his failure in other words—to participate in way of life he once called "a hundred times more ardent and delightful than that of a mistress." (*PE*, iii:255; iii:151) Though Rousseau described his embrace of reverie as originating in the desire to escape, it becomes apparent in reading Rousseau's text that his reveries were at least equally motivated by a desire for society as they were by a desire to escape it.³⁴ The *Reveries*, in fact, reveal those two opposite impulses to be closely related, even mutually constitutive. The *Reveries* can be read either as a desire to escape society or as a longing for it. Rousseau turns inward not (only) out of narcissism but also to find the fellowship he deeply desired but never found in his personal life.³⁵ Perhaps this longing for community was fantasy—no doubt it was—but all community is to some extent imaginary. What matters, from the perspective of Rousseauian republicanism, is that citizens be disposed to look beyond their private goals and interests and toward those goals and interests that they share with their fellow citizens. Our willingness to engage civically will always depend, to some extent, on our ability to imagine a future polity in which we can play a meaningful role.

For this reason, democratic theorists have begun to think about the institutions, practices and, of late, affects that produce this sense of civic mindedness.³⁶ Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* exhorts democratic citizens to imagine forms of democratic friendship that can energize and democratize modern polities. "O, my friends, there is no friend," he repeats at the beginning of each chapter. The lament, taken from Montaigne expresses a longing for friendship, though Derrida is unable to say much about what democratic friendship would look like, content to emphasize democracy's indeterminacy, its state of perpetual becoming. Rousseauian reverie offers an entry point into what democratic friendship might look like. Montaigne's lament simultaneously expresses a critique of friendship as it is practiced in contemporary society and a longing for true friendship, as he imagines it. That there is no friend does not mean that there is no friendship.

[I]f presently there is no friend, let us act so that henceforth there will be friends of this "sovereign master friendship." This is what I call you to; answer my call, this is our responsibility.³⁷

Reverie provides the basis, though perhaps not the inclination, for such an open-hearted friendship. The love of humanity felt in reverie is perhaps too abstract to yield affection for actually existing human beings. And, yet, in a time of corruption, reverie is, for Rousseau, the only remaining pathway to a love of humankind, the only place he can commune with human beings in the immediate, sensory way nature intended.

The greatest happiness for Rousseau lay in a *communion des coeurs*, which, in Rousseau's early writings, generally meant love of the *patrie*. Reverie was initially resignation for Rousseau—a concession that happiness was no longer possible for him in society—but it surprised him with a new way of communing with the hearts of other men and women. That was, ultimately, what Rousseau encountered in reverie—the human heart. In reverie, “*il n'y a plus de non-moi*” (there is no longer not-me) as Gaston Bachelard put it.³⁸ We lose ourselves in reverie just as we did in love of the *patrie*. Rousseau says we must do at the beginning of the second *Discourse*—go back in time, toward original goodness.

There is a love of humanity inspired by reverie, a love that evokes the savage's aversion to the suffering of others and, potentially, a corresponding concern for their welfare. However, the love inspired by reverie is cosmopolitan—it is a love of order really, of others to be sure, but also of oneself and of nature; it is a love of existence, experienced through an unmediated evocation of sentiment. This is pantheism, universalism, cosmopolitanism—dispositions that can be very useful, even necessary in a heterogeneous polity. Many doubt, Rousseau among them, that a general love of humanity can elicit the intensity of emotion necessary for patriotism, especially Rousseau's highly exclusive patriotism. The dispositions inspired by reverie are not the exclusive or patriotic ones that Rousseau believed would support the kind of society he envisioned in the *Social Contract* or, even more so, in the *Government of Poland*. But they do point toward the more expansive attachments that Rousseau acknowledged to be superior even to patriotism. Rousseau was himself skeptical about humanity's capacity to achieve this expansive love of others, but in the *Reveries*, he provided an answer to his own skepticism.

Rousseau was famously skeptical of cosmopolitanism, even if his moral philosophy pointed toward it, because he doubted that the bonds of fraternity could preserve their affective force while being extended that widely. However, Rousseau's reasoning suggests that he would have looked approvingly on any viable pathway toward a heartfelt fellowship of humanity.³⁹ Late in life, Rousseau discovered such a pathway himself, in the form of solitary reverie. By removing himself from society, Rousseau discovered that the barriers to a genuine love of humanity were all products of society. Although reverie does nothing to alter the socio-political reality of institutionalized inequality, it does present a spiritual or psychological alternative to it—one grounded in the universality of original goodness rather than the particularity of *amour propre*.

Whatever the differences between cosmopolitanism and patriotism, they nevertheless have something in common, something more fundamental than any of the things that separate them: the broadening of fraternal sentiments. The imperative to broaden one's identity and ideas animated Rousseau's critique of cosmopolitanism as well as his admiration for it. Rousseau never criticized cosmopolitanism as an authentically experienced sentiment. He criticized it in its abstract, rationalistic form, which all too often ends up as an excuse not to love at all rather than a basis for universal love.⁴⁰ Rousseau doubted cosmopolitanism's capacity to be the spring of virtuous action, but he never denied the great appeal of cosmopolitanism. His was more a defense of patriotism than an attack on cosmopolitanism. In a perfect world, human beings would love one another without regard for political divisions. But, given the constraints of modernity, societies ought to take advantage of whatever they can to broaden the moral ties of citizens. For Rousseau, the most important political choice was not between patriotism and cosmopolitanism; it was rather between love of self in conjunction with others and love of self at the expense of others.

Because both patriotism and cosmopolitanism generalize affect, both have the capacity to serve as critical safeguards against the particularizing effects of *amour propre*. The drawback of cosmopolitanism for Rousseau was not its object of moral affect; it was rather cosmopolitanism's tendency to become purely intellectual, to dilute affective ties to the point of impotence. Patriotism, though it carries its own risks, has the necessary *énergie* to overcome the particularizing tendencies of *amour propre*. As Bryan Garsten has shown, Rousseau believed that only affect could immunize societies against the dangers of *amour propre* and particularity.⁴¹ The question then becomes whether, under the right circumstances, cosmopolitanism can inspire such moral affect in ordinary citizens. The answer Rousseau offers in the *Reveries* is, yes, a cosmopolitan embrace of humanity is possible under certain circumstances, in particular the ironic circumstance of solitary reverie. This, however, begs yet one more question—namely, can the spiritual *communion des coeurs* experienced in reverie can be translated into a concrete, political concern for the welfare of one's fellow human beings?

A general love of humanity does not necessarily translate into a political commitment to civic participation, as in the case of those “supposed cosmopolites” who “boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one.” (GM, iii:287; iv:81) At first, Rousseau’s own retreat from society would appear to be an instance of this dynamic. After all, Rousseau’s cosmopolitan reveries were born of a repudiation of politics; they represented a refusal of politics and political life and reflected an animosity toward most of the particular human beings with whom he had actually interacted. Reverie would, therefore, seem to be an extremely unlikely path to active citizenship. Nevertheless, the dispositions elicited by Rousseauean reverie are not without political relevance. For modern, diverse democracies in particular, Rousseau’s *Reveries* yields valuable insights into civic participation,

more valuable, perhaps, than the explicitly political writings, which often presuppose highly homogeneous populations.

There is a practice and a substance of reverie, each one of which has the potential to serve democratic citizenship. The practice of reverie supports democratic citizenship by removing prejudice and cultivating a climate of openness, while the substance of reverie—the truths apprehended in reverie—offers the potential to encourage a concern for the welfare of others and a collective identity. The practice of reverie, as we have seen, is marked by a clearing away of prejudice and a thoroughgoing openness to nature and (what amounts to the same thing) to one's inner voice. The walker's active role is negative; it is a withdrawal from social life and a resistance to ossification. This produces a highly lucid but indeterminate state of conscious activity. Under the right circumstances, this clearing in consciousness will enable a corresponding, substantive transformation of consciousness based on nature or nature's voice, manifested as the love of existence and a rediscovered *communion des coeurs*. Ironically, reverie's solitude enables a new, or perhaps it is better to say, a renewed love of others via a love of the natural goodness inherent in every human soul.

Reverie is precipitated by emptying; it is theoretically an opening into which anything may enter. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau described the particular ideas that entered that void during his own reveries, but his text invites the reader to imagine the results that reverie may produce for her. The active component of reverie is negative—the purging of all constraints on conscious activity. From that point on, reverie becomes a largely passive activity, as the subject allows her surroundings to direct her consciousness. Reverie is about nothing in particular, at least not initially. That nothingness helps keep us in the present, sensing our immediate existence rather than reflecting upon our obligations, desires or fantasies. Here, reverie's radical dimension becomes apparent. Reverie can threaten to undermine the stability of identity, to sabotage or infiltrate the construction of identity or sense of self. In this way, the desire to transcend locution can disrupt the narrative one tells about oneself, to clarify dogma and prejudice and facilitate a sensitivity to difference.

Reverie's essential activity is disruptive to all settled patterns of thinking, all the structures, conventions, and presuppositions that usually constrain conscious activity, directing consciousness always toward that which is most basic, most fundamental about human existence. Anything that society has added on and, all too often, ingrained in consciousness will ideally wither away in the course of a reverie. What reverie offers is not an agenda for democracy but the openness that a truly egalitarian democracy would need to flourish. Reverie removes prejudice, status, and *amour propre* from consciousness. It is a repudiation of politics that can ultimately function as a support for it—in a democracy. Though it is frequently anti-political, the *Reveries* is also suffused with a longing for a less fragmented, more equal, less corrupt politics. Reverie's escape from politics might preclude

a return to it, but if we can return to society, we will do so with an open, non-judgmental heart, a disposition characteristic of what Jacques Derrida called a “democratic friend.”

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept. . . . When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness. O my democratic friends . . .⁴²

Derrida imagines a “politics of friendship” in which citizens see beyond the “homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema” that have heretofore constrained patterns of identification.⁴³ Though his idiom and political context were different, Rousseau aspired to a similar ethic of political engagement, free of divisive relations and grounded in affective solidarity. Rousseauian reverie causes patterns of particular association and affiliation to evaporate, and, in that, it contributes to what is perhaps the greatest service that affect can provide for democracy. Reverie loosens rigid patterns of exclusion, be they homo-fraternal and phallogocentric, or bourgeois, sectarian, and aristocratic.

Reverie’s negation of *amour propre* creates a clearing, out of which (what we might call) “cosmopolitan citizenship” or “radical democratic citizenship” can take shape—citizenship that is constituted from the bottom up, rather than imposed from above or from the outside. Reverie is an individualized experience that opens consciousness to the possibility of engaging the other in her full otherness, without the use of cultural markers. It offers a path to fellowship via the stripping away of identity rather than through its imposition. It is what Jean-Luc Nancy has called a “lack of identity,” which, in its very formlessness, allows for the possibility of community.

I start out from the idea that . . . the thinking of community as essence—is in effect the closure of the political. Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a *common being*, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is *in common*, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being *in common* has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being *in common* means, to the contrary, *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) “lack of identity.”⁴⁴

An inward, perhaps narcissistic, turn toward self-absorbed reverie strips away the barriers to authentic commonality, to what Nancy refers to as “being in common” rather than communion. The former accepts the fluid nature of identity, the impossibility of closure, while the latter attempts to fix it or fuse it.

Civic identity, as theorized by the great proponents of republican citizenship, Rousseau among them, has generally involved the pursuit, preservation, and/or cultivation of a common set of cultural practices, norms, and principles. Nancy and Derrida argue that democratic solidarity results not from the discovery of a set of shared beliefs or practices, but from their dilution. It is necessary, they argue, to develop a new “*praxis* of community,” as Nancy calls it, a mode of engaging the other that transcends the confines of the old discourse of community, that accepts the ultimate finitude of every human being, rather than seeking to sublate that finitude into something more.⁴⁵ This new *praxis*, for which Rousseauean reverie provides a useful model, must operate negatively, in the Rousseauean sense, against the grain of inherited cultural practices and norms. It must pursue community while resisting closure.⁴⁶

Reverie’s capacity to strip away cultural prejudices and preconceptions offers the possibility of an authentically cosmopolitan civic affect, a new “*praxis* of community,” a new way to, as Rousseau says of Emile, “generalize our views and consider in our pupil abstract man.” Emile is educated to love what is most essentially human in all people, such that he “puts himself in no class but finds his bearings in all.” (*E*, iv:510; xiii:378) Time spent in reverie, away from all social interaction, inclines moral agents toward this disposition of tolerance and openness, and, as such, has implications not only for moral education but for civic affect as well.

The dispositions elicited by reverie—openness, tolerance, and love of humankind—are widely regarded as critical to the flourishing of today’s large, diverse democracies. Martha Nussbaum, for example in an essay on democratic education, writes the following:

The student in the United States, for example, may continue to regard herself as in part defined by her particular loves—for her family, her religious and/or ethnic and/or racial community or communities, even for her country. But she must also, and centrally, learn to recognize humanity wherever she encounters it, undeterred by traits that are strange to her, and be eager to understand humanity in its “strange” guises. She must learn enough about the different to recognize common aims, aspirations, and values, and enough about these common ends to see how variously they are instantiated in the many cultures and many histories.⁴⁷

In exile, Rousseau came to view reverie as the surest path to an appreciation of the commonality of human beings and an understanding of what Nussbaum calls our “common ends.” The path Rousseau favored was not

multicultural but pre-cultural. Reverie accesses universal truths not through the study of particularity but directly, as it were, through the contemplation of what is universal.

Can this apolitical universality be made to serve civic purposes? As previously argued, Rousseau's reveries were as much a longing for society as they were a rejection of it, just as Montaigne's lament was much more than just a critique of friendship. Rousseau and Montaigne longed for human interaction *as-it-could-be*. It was because Rousseau so desperately craved social belonging that he was compelled to radically recoil from debased versions of it. At base, Rousseau was motivated by a desire to return to his humanity, and, thereby, to human beings. It is possible that, in reverie, Rousseau so abstracted away from actually existing human beings that the ones he came to love existed only in his imagination. Perhaps, he too had become like the cosmopolitans he castigated in the first version of the *Social Contract*, who love everyone in order to love no one. Anyone who dreams of an improved, more just, more democratic, more fraternal polity will have to face that possibility. It may be that reverie is too detached, too apolitical, too cosmopolitan to permit a return to civic life. However, if we are able to return, we will do so accompanied by a deeply felt set of moral convictions.

Notes

- 1 Michael Davis, *The Autobiography of Philosophy*, 129.
- 2 Holbach, *Le bon sens*, quoted in Jack Lively, ed., *The Enlightenment* (London: Longmans, 1966) 61.
- 3 See note 12.
- 4 Rousseau recounts his botanizing in Walk Seven of the *Reveries*. Rousseau's *Letters on Botany* are collected in volume IV of the *Oeuvres complètes*.
- 5 In writings prior to the *Reveries*, Rousseau had argued that *amour propre* is not always anathema to virtue and happiness. Properly directed, it can elicit a love of the *patrie* and a commitment to the common good. In this, his last writing, Rousseau seems to see only the corrupting effects of *amour propre*.
- 6 The *Reveries* initially appears to be a book of reveries, and yet I have described reverie as an anti-linguistic experience and as never verbal. Upon closer inspection, the reader notes that the text is divided into ten Walks, not ten reveries. Why did Rousseau choose not to call each Walk a "reverie:" "Reverie One," "Reverie Two," and so on, rather than "Walk One," "Walk Two," and so on? One reason would be that reverie is impossible to capture in writing. One might achieve an ontological or existential description of reverie, as Rousseau undertakes in Walk Five. Alternately, one might attempt to translate insights apprehended in reverie, as I believe Rousseau does in the remaining reveries.

Many commentators focus on Walk Five (where Rousseau floats on a raft) and Walk Two (where Rousseau is dazed after being toppled by a dog), as the only accounts of reverie in the *Reveries*. I would suggest, in contrast, that every Walk is about reverie. Walks Two and Five are the only two ontological accounts of reveries experienced by Rousseau himself. However, while the other Walks do not detail specific reveries, they do distill and discuss the substantive insights derived by Rousseau in moments of reverie on specific *promenades*. Every Walk, therefore, ought to be read as an account of reverie—Two and Five as ontological accounts and the rest as translations of insights derived from reverie.

- 7 See, for example, John Scott, "The Illustrative Education of Rousseau's *Emile*," *American Political Science Review* 108:3 (2013) 533–46.
- 8 The term is used several times in Walk Five.
- 9 Rousseau felt that he had not communicated his own ideas in his published works, a conclusion he drew on the basis of the public's reception and interpretation of his works.
- 10 Raymond, *La quête de soi*, 12.
- 11 The literary critic David Ulin describes art as operating "at a level beyond the rational. . . . In literature, truth is not so much known as it is felt, and empathy is as important as understanding. In literature, the logic of the story can sometimes trump the logic of the world. If this sounds disingenuous, it's not meant to—on the contrary, it's what makes art resonate." ("The Lie That Tells the Truth," *Los Angeles Times*, February 5, 2006, R3) Ulin's account captures the nature of the truths Rousseau believed he had experienced in reverie and attempted to communicate in Reverie.
- 12 Rousseau's critique of the arts and sciences should not be read as a denial of the capacity of the arts to communicate truth. Rousseau acknowledged the power of art, poetry and music, which helps to explain why he regarded their abuse as a matter of great importance.
- 13 "But thanks to Typography and the use we make of it, the dangerous reveries of Hobbes and Spinoza will remain forever." ii:20; iii:28. In the *Moral Letters*, Rousseau wrote, "Let us not be surprised, then, at seeing prideful and vain philosophy losing itself in its reveries and the finest geniuses exhausting themselves on puerile things." (iv:1095; xii:186).
- 14 See the *Letter to Voltaire*.
- 15 Proper motivation does not guarantee the goodness of ideas; it is necessary to truth but not sufficient. Rousseau notes that we might fall into error even when we are well-intentioned. (R, viii:22; i:1018)
- 16 "When I rose up against opinion with so much ardor, I was still bearing its yoke without having noticed it." (R, i:1077; viii:71)
- 17 "The sad truth that time and reason have unveiled to me by making me sense my misfortune has made me see there was no remedy for it and that all that was left was for me to resign myself to it." (R, i:1012; viii:17)
- 18 Charles Butterworth translates the phrase as "to cut [oneself] off" in the *Collected Writings of Rousseau* (R, i:1040; viii:41)
- 19 Intellectually, all of this was clear to Rousseau from an early age, but, personally, he had not freed himself of a concern for the opinion of others. As he recounts in the text, Rousseau had tasted the pleasures of reverie at points throughout his life. However, it was only when he was forced into a more thoroughgoing exile that he came to appreciate reverie's sublime revelations.
- 20 Maurice Cranston reminds us that Rousseau's self-described solitude was generally not solitude at all. Even on the remote Ile de la Motte, Cranston lists among the island's inhabitants Rousseau, permanent residents, Therèse, servants, and a series of visitors hoping to meet Rousseau. *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- 21 Raymond, *La quête de soi*, 147.
- 22 René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000) 23.
- 23 Rousseau believed that Voltaire's *Candide* was written in response to his *Lettre à Voltaire*.
- 24 Descartes, *Meditations*, 23.
- 25 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962) 320.

- 26 This draws on but does not duplicate Locke's or Condillac's empiricism. Rousseauian sentiment is something distinct from both Descartes' *cogito* and Condillac and Locke's sensation. Whereas the *cogito* is a faculty of the mind, and sensation is a faculty of the body, sentiment is a faculty of the heart or the soul. Rationality is the foundation of the *cogito*, sensation of Lockean empiricism, and sentiment of Rousseauian reverie.
- 27 "You say that my reason chooses the feeling that my heart prefers, and I don't deny it. That is what happens in all deliberations where judgment is not enlightened enough to reach a decision without the help of the will. Do you believe that in taking the opposite view with so much ardor, your Gentlemen are influenced by a more impartial motive." (*D*, i:879; i:170)
- 28 The charm of botany disappears, Rousseau writes, if one "only wants to grind it all up in a mortar." (*R*, i:1064; viii:60)
- 29 Rousseau's herbaria are quite systematic and well-organized, even in the context of practices common among eighteenth-century botanists. It is perhaps not completely accurate to say that Rousseau's botanizing had no aim. The aim of his botanizing was the same as the aim of his reveries: to commune with nature. Botany and reverie each enable that communion by leaving behind all of the social and psychological impediments to an unmediated communion with nature.
- 30 Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de la Rêverie* (Paris: Presses Universitaire sde France, 1960)
- 31 Rousseau indicates that any progress he has made toward knowledge of the human heart has come from the observation of children. Children seem to embody the unfocused yet alert balance that drives reverie.
- 32 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites de J.J. Rousseau*, 152.
- 33 Rousseau's anger at Molière's portrayal of the misanthrope in his eponymous play betrays a discomfiting recognition of himself in the character. Like Alceste, Rousseau is alone.
- 34 For example, in the sixth Walk, Rousseau writes, "to do good is the truest happiness the human heart can savor," a happiness that Rousseau conceded had not been available to him for many years. i:1051; viii:49.
- 35 Reverie is narcissistic, a turn toward oneself, but it is also selfless, a loss of self in common humanity. At its best, it reconciles love of self and love of others.
- 36 George Marcus, for example, defines emotion as critical to the derivation and implementation of rational precepts. However, he does not give sentiment the positive normative charge that Rousseau does. He illuminates the role of emotion in political life and diffuses claims that it must be suppressed but does not go so far as to suggest that it is the basis of good citizenship. *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) 7. Cheryl Hall notes that modern theorists have for the most part eschewed discussion of the passions. *The Trouble with Passion: Political Theory Beyond the Reign of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Hall argues that passion should be a component of political deliberation. However, the end toward which she defends passion remains cognitive. She does not defend passion as a good in and of itself, but as instrumental to other goods, like democracy. For Rousseau, love of existence and of humanity was itself a good. Passion for Hall continues to be defended on the basis of some antecedently defined good, which is itself dispassionate. By contrast, for Rousseau, love is the antecedently defined good.
- 37 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997) 236. (Italics in original.)
- 38 Bachelard, *La Poétique de la Rêverie*, 144.
- 39 Readers have generally read Rousseau as hostile to cosmopolitanism, associating his reverence for patriotism with the exclusive forms of nationalism that

emerged in the decades following his passing. Rousseau's arguments for and against cosmopolitanism are more nuanced than this reading would suggest. While it is true that Rousseau was skeptical of cosmopolitanism's power to motivate and disdainful of those philosophers who advocate it without attending to this problem, he never dismissed cosmopolitanism as a theoretical idea or criticized it as an authentically experienced sentiment. Patriotism does offer a more powerful, more immediate incentive for most: "Interest and commiseration must in some way be confined to be activated." (*PE*, iii:254; iii:151) Those cosmopolitan philosophers who failed to grasp this principle came in for some harsh criticism from Rousseau. He regarded them as hypocrites who preached an abstract love of all as cover for their selfish lack of concern for anyone beyond themselves. However, Rousseau admired genuine cosmopolitans—those, like Socrates, who could love all of humanity with the intensity that most of us can muster only for compatriots. See Neidleman, "Rousseau's Rediscovered *Communion des Coeurs*: Cosmopolitanism in the Reveries of the Solitary Walker," *Political Studies* 60:1 (2012) 76–94.

- 40 The second of Rousseau's three moral maxims in *Emile* is the following: "One pities in others only those ills from which one does not feel oneself exempt." (iv:507; xiii:224).
- 41 Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) ch. 2.
- 42 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 306.
- 43 Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 306.
- 44 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) xxxviii.
- 45 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 25–6.
- 46 "Community without community is *to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity (because it never stops coming, it ceaselessly resists collectivity itself as much as it resists the individual)." Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 71.
- 47 Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* 19 (October/November 1994) 4.

5 Republicanism

Rousseau's *corpus* was highly personal, much more so than those of other leading philosophers. He tells us that he wrote only in response to an urgent, personal necessity, meaning that his texts describe circumstances within which he believed he could himself be happy. (*R*, i:1012; viii:18) At first, Rousseau's principal political text, the *Social Contract*, seems not to fit this pattern because of the formality of the way in which its argument is framed and executed. But the Rousseau of the *Social Contract* (and of his political writings more generally) offers more than a formal account of what Rousseau refers to in the subtitle to the *Social Contract* as the “principles of political right.” The formal institutions of legitimate governance were central to Rousseau's political theory, to be sure, but his political theory itself was composed in service to a recuperation of the immediate love of existence that was characteristic of human beings in their natural state. (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28) Political institutions that serve liberty and equality were to be guaranteed not only because they are our birthright, but also because they are preconditions for a communion of hearts in a republic of virtue.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the apparatus of solitary reverie served not only as an escape from the corruption of modern society; it was simultaneously a pathway to an authentic *communion des coeurs*. Likewise, the primary apparatus of Rousseau's political theory—*institutions of popular sovereignty*—serves not only liberty and equality but also communion. Rousseau's writings on republicanism, like his writings on reverie, enunciate structural or formal preconditions for the re-emergence of communion. In addition to adding an oft-neglected dimension to Rousseau's political theory, this reading also has the advantage of assimilating the *Social Contract*, so frequently regarded as an anomaly in Rousseau's *corpus*, to the rest of his writings. If free institutions are treated as instrumental to the creation of a republic of virtue, then the *Social Contract* can sit alongside the *Reveries*, and, as we will see later, *Clarens* and *Emile*, as examples of ancient wholeness reconstituted in a modern context.

To make this case, it is necessary to call into question one of the most settled and fundamental assumptions of Rousseau interpretation—that

freedom and equality are the end point of Rousseau's political theory. Readers of the *Social Contract* generally presuppose that its purpose is liberty grounded in equality, and the disagreements tend to revolve around what kind of liberty Rousseau favored—whether it was collective liberty, in which the individual is subordinate, or individual liberty, in which a collective identity is the means to an end. Robert Derathé, for example, begins from the assumption that liberty and equality are the ultimate ends in Rousseau's political theory, citing a passage from the *Social Contract* in which Rousseau writes that liberty and equality are the end of any “*système de législation*.” (SC, iii:391; iv:162) Derathé does not ask, however, whether there is a further end or purpose to a “*système de législation*.¹ In addition to liberty and equality, I argue in this chapter, Rousseau had one more aspiration for politics—one that went beyond liberty and equality, and one for which liberty and equality were necessary preconditions: “Ah! where are the games and festivals of my youth? Where is the concord of the citizens? Where is the public fraternity? Where is the pure joy and the real gaiety?” (LDA, v:121; x:349) Rousseau's interpreters have long understood that “public fraternity” was intimately linked to liberty in Rousseau's political theory, but they have assumed that the trajectory of the argument goes one way—that “public fraternity” or patriotism is a prerequisite to liberty and not the other way around. Stanley Hoffmann writes, for example, that “patriotism is the condition of the reign of the general will.”² Joshua Cohen argues similarly that “human nature requires us to accept demanding conditions of civic solidarity as preconditions for a free community of equals.”³ I argue in this chapter that the trajectory of the argument moves in the opposite direction as well: just as liberty flourishes where there is fraternity, so too does fraternity flourish where there is liberty. My purpose is not to denigrate or demote liberty and equality, but rather to elevate fraternity, such that all three are understood as equally significant to Rousseau's political system. For Rousseau, each one of these values requires the presence of the others. Just as liberty and equality will not be secured without the patriotic sentiments that supply the motivation for the privileging of the common good over particular interests, so too is patriotic solidarity a byproduct of the free and equal association of citizens.

Throughout his writings—the second *Discourse*, the *Confessions*, the *Reveries*—Rousseau dreamed of life in a virtuous republic and lamented its absence in modern Europe. He dreamed in these texts not of formal freedom and equality, of course, but of the fellowship that results from self-government, from the collective ownership of social and political institutions. In the sections that follow, I describe the experience of communion in a virtuous republic (section I), explain the role this ideal plays in Rousseau's political theory (section II), and finally apply these insights to three paradoxes typically associated with Rousseau's political theory (sections III and IV).

I. Political Communion or “The Ecstasies of Tender Hearts”⁴

Over the course of his literary career, Rousseau pursued both individual and social paths to the recuperation of the unmediated truths that were obvious to the savage and the Spartan but that had become opaque to modern men and women. An unmediated connection to one’s fellow citizens was, for Rousseau, the political recuperation of the savage’s unmediated communion with nature. The more mediated our engagement with existence, the more Rousseau distrusted it—philosophy, luxury, sectarianism, theoretical systems, feudalism, political representation, and ornamentation, to list a few examples. By contrast, the less mediated our engagement with the world, the more sublime Rousseau found it—nature, patriotism, Southern language, simple melodies, sentiment, personal experience, for example. Rousseau believed that the best political institutions would operate negatively (just as good education does), in order to break down barriers to an unmediated communion with one’s fellow citizens. If citizens are to rediscover the simple pleasure of immediate communion, they must free themselves from all the forms of dependence that mediate their relationship to their psychological, spiritual, and physical needs.⁵ Should they succeed, they will have created a political space in which they can, as citizens, construct a fellowship of republican virtue. It was this fellowship that Rousseau found so compelling about a virtuous republic and only this fellowship that could make politics preferable to solitude. Without it, Rousseau would have opted for the pleasures of a private life over the vanities of a social one.

Across the breadth of his political writings, Rousseau invoked fraternity at least as often as he did liberty and equality. For example:

- In defining the common good, Rousseau advocated a very basic, pragmatic approach: “every just action necessarily has as its rule the greatest common utility.” (GM, iii:330; iv:114) Rousseau’s preference for this kind of reasoning was not grounded in a commitment to the internal logic of formal utilitarianism (the development of which followed Rousseau), but was rather the product of his conviction that a focus on the greatest common utility is the best route to a communion of hearts. Rousseau preferred the language of the “common utility” to the language of rights because rights divide while, in his view, the common good unites. An emphasis on rights encourages citizens to focus on their private interest—the life they are free to live independent of their fellow citizens. By contrast, an emphasis on the common good encourages citizens to think about the interests they share with their compatriots. Rights have their place in Rousseau’s political thought, both as an essential aspect of our humanity and as a precondition for a solidaristic republic of equals. But Rousseau’s descriptions of the end of politics focus on the “common utility,” “public happiness,” and “concord of citizens.”

- Rousseau insisted on a substantive account of equality, pushing beyond procedural equality or equal protection under the law: “with regard to wealth, no citizen should be so opulent that he can buy another, and none so poor that he is constrained to sell himself.” (SC, iii:391–2; iv:162) From the poor come those who “foment tyranny” and from the wealthy come the tyrants. (SC, iii:392; iv:163) As citizens of advanced capitalist societies know well, formal equality is quite compatible with significant substantive inequality, and Rousseau believed substantive inequality to be a great danger to social unity. How one defines equality, whether substantive or formal, has significant implications for the unification and solidarity of the political body. Since solidarity was for Rousseau the most compelling justification for political life, it was clear to him that equality had to be pursued substantively as well as procedurally.
- Rousseau evaluated the *liberum veto*, which he reluctantly endorsed for Poland, based on its capacity to be an engine of unity. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau had stated forcefully his opposition to any division of sovereign power. The power to veto implies a division of sovereignty and so must be initially considered with the highest degree of suspicion. However, in the Polish case, Rousseau ultimately judged it appropriate to make use of a veto in matters relating to “the fundamental points of the constitution.” (GP, iii:995, xi:203) These principles were essential to Poland’s cultural inheritance and had to be protected if Poland was to preserve its unity. However, applying the veto to anything outside of these fundamental principles would only contribute to divisiveness. And so, Rousseau endorsed the veto, but only in those cases where it protected the sources of Polish unity. Where it had the potential to divide the public, it was to be scrupulously avoided.

This list could grow, but this is sufficient to illustrate how, for Rousseau, civic virtue and patriotic solidarity were animating ideals of all things political, including the institutions of self-government. Rousseau had very little to say about public deliberation, for example, because he believed that public deliberation was mostly dangerous to civic harmony. He focused on things like the games citizens play as children (GP, iii:955; xi:171), the occupations they engage in as adults (*Constitution for Corsica*), and the size of their territory: “Greatness of nations! Extensiveness of States! first and principal source of the misfortunes of the human race.” (GP, iii:970; xi:183)

The immediacy of political fellowship is perhaps less intuitive than the immediacy of the savage’s sentiment of existence or the immediacy of Rousseau’s other models of reconciliation: the Walker’s communion with nature, the vicar’s profession of faith, Emile’s education, or life on the Clarens estate. It may seem odd that Rousseau’s most sublime pathway to immediacy was the one that leads furthest from our natural state. However, while the *Social Contract* is formally sophisticated, the formal institutions of popular

sovereignty are created to serve a basic, immediate truth. Formal sophification is, in other words, the prerequisite to a return to substantive simplicity. The radical independence and immediacy of the state of nature is ironically best recaptured within the context of a fairly sophisticated set of social relations.⁶ Clearly, immediacy is not incompatible with an expansive civic identification. This actually mirrors the savage's love of existence, which, while sensed intimately from moment to moment, was also a universal love of the world and all the creatures in it. The savage's *amour de soi* was a proto-cosmopolitan, proto-Christian (in its universality) embrace of the world and one's existence in it. Most of our social development has obscured those essential truths to us, but a free, virtuous republic has the potential to return them to our consciousness, albeit in a transformed incarnation.

In politics, communion takes the form of a love of the *patrie*, born of a shared heritage, a shared set of interests, and collective participation in civic life. It is the natural consequence of a republic of equals, in which association produces a broadening of ideas and feelings. (SC, iii:364; iv:141). Rousseau believed that the “felicity” of the social body is greater than the sum of private goods and lies rather in the “liaison uniting them.” (GM, iii:284; iv:78) This felicity is a kind of transcendence analogous to that experienced in reverie. It is this deep, essential truth of human happiness that justifies politics. Political communion, in those rare instances in which it can be found, surpasses all other forms of happiness, including those made available in solitude. The soul's “most delicious feeling,” Rousseau writes in the *Geneva Manuscript*, is “love of virtue.” (GM, iii:283; iv:78) Republicanism is the best (in the sense of the most effective) and only just regime, but that is not enough to persuade Rousseau to opt for politics over solitude.⁷ Politics must also be personally redemptive.

Although republican citizenship is in many ways a far cry from the savage's unfocused, unparticularized love of existence, it is, more fundamentally, the recuperation of the emotional bond to others born of the savage's instinct for pity. Natural goodness is not the opposite of morality; it is rather the wellspring of morality. It is incorrect to suggest, as Arthur Melzer and Roger Masters do, that society is, as Melzer puts it, “anti-natural.”⁸ It would be fair to call society “artificial,” perhaps even “unnatural,” but “anti-natural” goes too far. Melzer argues that social life must be “anti-natural” based on Rousseau's characterization of socialization as a reconstitution of human nature. While human nature is indeed reconstituted in a fellowship of equals, it is a transformation of human nature that is also a return to nature, a return to the natural goodness that forms the basis of Rousseau's system. Human beings must be remade because the *amour propre* that governs modern society has transformed *amour de soi* and suppressed the natural sympathy we feel for one another. The Legislator is tasked with transforming us once again—not so as to jettison human nature but rather to recuperate it in a modern context. *Amour propre* is generalized so that it ceases to operate at the expense of others and once again includes the

basic sympathy that happy, independent human beings feel for one another. Civil society's extreme dependence at first appears to be the antithesis of the state of nature. But a just civil society and the state of nature are actually *both* antitheses of modern corrupt societies. The extreme dependence of civil society is the only social path to the recuperation of the independence natural to human beings.

The origin of the social bond lies, then, in the natural inclination toward pity, although pity is itself too diffuse to be the actual cement of society. Moreover, pity suggests a position of relative superiority with respect to the individual being pitied. In society, pity is, therefore, replaced by equality as the basis for a *moral* concern for others. Equality is the condition for legitimate politics, because it is only under conditions of equality that our general concern for others can be focused into a *moral* concern for equal justice. Pity alone is not sufficient to emancipate the weak from patterns of dependence. Justice transforms pity for others into a shared *commitment* to the elevation or flourishing of the political body. The difference between pity and justice is the difference between goodness and virtue. Goodness is sufficient to elicit pity for those who suffer, but, as Judith Shklar has written, justice is necessary if that suffering is to be alleviated.⁹ The savage weeps in the presence of one who suffers, but he feels no moral obligation to alleviate that person's suffering. And so, as Rousseau tells us, morality is born with society, even if the psychological *basis* for morality is antecedent to it.

The elevated commitment made available in a republic of equals is attainable *only* in a republic of equals. And so, while it is cutting against the grain of our natural independence, citizenship holds out the highly appealing incentive of an authentic communion of hearts. As Roger Masters writes, the will "of the individual is trained to orient itself to the community."¹⁰ Although this formula suggests coercion to most of Rousseau's interlocutors, he describes citizens as willing agents of their own transformation. Given the chance to express their will politically, citizens will strive to create the conditions for a communion of hearts. Their transformation is, in other words, the result of customs and *moeurs* to which citizens will want to cleave, precisely because they find so much fulfillment in a solidaristic community. While it is true that citizens are transformed in society, this transformation is as much the result of their participation in self-government as it is a precondition for it. Consequently the transformation of men into citizens is a somewhat less onerous (and less coercive) task than standard interpretations would suggest.

Not all social bonds, it should be noted, produce the salutary communion that Rousseau extolled in the texts we reviewed in chapter two, and so Rousseau was concerned to distinguish between the unity of a virtuous republic and the conformity that reigned in modern Europe. When we enter the civil state, justice substitutes for instinct and our actions acquire moral status for the first time. For traditional social contract theorists, this transformation is characterized as progressive or as an ascent. However, Rousseau's argument

does not follow this pattern. Morality begins *with* society, it's true, but it does not generally predominate *in* society and, for that reason, Rousseau says (just after he associates morality with society) that the move into society often "degrades [man] below the condition he left." (SC, iii:364; iv:141) Civil life offers the potential for happiness and morality, which, if realized, would cause us to "ceaselessly bless the happy moment" that tore us away from our natural state. Most of the time, however, civil life achieves no such thing and instead leaves us worse off than we would be had we chosen to remain in the state of nature.

There is a bond that emerges from the arts and sciences, commerce, and luxury—Rousseau refers to "social ties"—but it turns out that not all bonds are good. The bond necessitated by the arts and sciences, luxury, and commerce is grounded in self-interest (the interest we have independent of our compatriots as opposed to the interest we share with them). This posture of ostensible independence places individuals in a position of extreme dependence, which obliges "each of them to cooperate for the happiness of the others in order to be able to attain his own." (PN, ii:968; ii:193) All the while, the tightening of this corrupt social bond "loosens the bonds of society formed by mutual esteem and benevolence." These latter, authentic bonds are famously born not of self-interest but of the most complete dependence on the whole, which, according to Rousseau, is the precondition for true independence. (SC, iii:364; iv:141) Here, moral communion is possible and happiness is within our grasp. Rousseau sought commonality, but a commonality grounded in love of one's compatriots. The uniformity of Europe, by contrast, was based on selfishness and conformity.

As always, it is sentiment that determines the goodness of the social bond. If social solidarity originates in an expansive love of existence, then the social bond will be an affirmation of natural goodness. If social bonds grow out of inflamed *amour propre*, then they will serve it in turn, and citizens will not find happiness in politics. When Rousseau describes the Legislator as someone who "saw all of men's passions yet experienced none of them," (SC, iii:381; iv:154) it is generally assumed that he will be suppressing our passions. There is some truth to this, but, for the most part, the Legislator is tasked with *eliciting* useful passions: he will "persuade without convincing." There is one passion that we must suppress—the desire to impose ourselves upon others, to seek personal validation through the forced conformity of others. However, the ecstasy of republican citizenship comes from more than the subordination of private interests to public ones. The vindication of politics is the fellowship or communion that results when citizens elevate the interests they have in common over those that come at the expense of the common good.

It is solidarity and fellowship that hold the State together.¹¹ "The moral condition of a people," Rousseau wrote, "results less from the absolute state of its members than from the relations between them."¹² Justice and happiness cannot be achieved through the proper ordering of institutions alone.

It is essential that love of the *patrie* be elevated over all the selfish passions, as well. Political failure, Rousseau believed, originates when the “social tie begins to slacken.” (SC, iii:438; iv:198) From there, private interests subvert public ones, contradictions and debates arise, and the best advice is not accepted. The power of coming together is so strong for Rousseau that it exceeds all else in importance. In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau takes this argument further. There, he seems to suggest that choices are neither good nor bad in themselves but become so based on the extent to which citizens “come together” around them. (LM, iii:897; ix:306)

When citizens come together around a policy, it is a good indication that the policy serves the public good. Furthermore, the *fact* that citizens come together around a policy is itself a public good. Consequently, Rousseau focused less on the process of political deliberation than he did on the virtues that would be conducive to overcoming differences and facilitating communion. In fact, beyond describing the conditions for the legitimate exercise of sovereign power, Rousseau said little about the actual practice of self-government. Politics, for Rousseau, was less about crafting law than it was about crafting citizens capable of honoring the law.

In a fragment on politics, Rousseau lists the formal responsibilities of government: enforce the laws, defend liberty, maintain mores, and provide for the public good. (OC, iii:486) However, immediately after listing these, he adds this:

. . . as important as these precepts can seem, they will be reduced to vain and sterile maxims impossible to practice if they are not rendered effective by the active and sublime principle that must inspire them; this is what I would like to try to make sensible. (OC, iii:486)

There is an element of mystery to this fragment. What exactly is the sublime principle to which Rousseau makes reference? I would offer that it is the patriotic communion that I have attempted to describe in this section. This communion is itself an animating principle of Rousseau’s political theory. It both guarantees the integrity of sovereign power and validates the totality of the political enterprise.

II. The Trajectory of Rousseau’s Political Argument

Rousseau, as we have seen both here and in chapter two, valued patriotism not only as a regulative instrument but also as an end in itself. If this is the case, then a reinterpretation of the relationship between patriotism and popular sovereignty is in order.

Patriotism, as Hoffmann, Cohen, and so many others have shown, is a condition for the reign of the general will—the foundation of enlightened public deliberation. This reading is not wrong, but it is incomplete—Incomplete

because it treats patriotism only as a condition for democracy and not also as a consequence of it. On this linear reading, as I will refer to it, patriotism is a cultural prerequisite to the viability of what is otherwise a formal political theory. The logic of this reading yields two possibilities: the cultivation of patriotism is conceptualized *either* as a threat to free and equal public deliberation *or* it is regarded as a precondition for it; patriotism either subverts the logic of popular sovereignty (by constraining deliberation) or ensures its integrity. But there is another way of formulating the relationship between patriotism and popular sovereignty. It is possible to conceive of patriotism and popular sovereignty as mutually reinforcing or, to invoke a spatial metaphor, as a bidirectional vector or a circle. Patriotism, on this account, serves more than an instrumental function. To be sure, patriotism is a precondition for the reign of the general will, but, on my reading it is equally the byproduct of the free and equal deliberation through which the general will is enunciated.¹³

Patriotic solidarity arises most profoundly under conditions of equality and mutual empowerment, in which an authentic bond may form, as opposed to one that is externally manufactured or externally imposed.¹⁴ This aspect of Rousseau's thought is left out of interpretations that imagine lawmaking as the endpoint of a process that begins with socialization, education, and the inculcation of a common identity. Rousseau's political theory should not be conceptualized in these linear terms, wherein a set of pre-political conditions serve to ensure the integrity of the general will. To understand Rousseau's political theory in these terms is to grasp one part of it to the exclusion of another. The general will is not only the *product* of a well-ordered polity; it is the *process* by which a well-ordered polity organizes itself.¹⁵ The general will was Rousseau's term for the mutually reinforcing action of popular sovereignty and civic virtue. Love of the *patrie*, in this dynamic, is not just the prerequisite to the legitimate exercise of sovereignty; it is equally the result of it.¹⁶

My claim is that participation in public affairs serves a double function. The less critical one—if this may be said of something that is so critical—is the handling of public business. More critical is the communion that results from public participation and, in turn, increases citizens' willingness to participate, ensures that citizens will privilege the general will over their particular wills, and reduces the overall need for legislation. Love of the *patrie* is a precondition for popular sovereignty *and* a consequence of equal and active participation in self-government, but, most importantly, it is the justification for political life—the reason Rousseau was willing to embrace *civisme* as a possible path to wholeness.¹⁷ Political unity is the redemption of politics, the substantive justification for entering political life, akin to Emile's moral independence and the Walker's self-sufficient solitude.

The entire apparatus of Rousseau's political theory points toward a communion of hearts.¹⁸ Because Rousseau calls the state the “realization of freedom,” interpreters like Frederick Neuhouser treat freedom as the endpoint

or purpose of politics.¹⁹ But this interpretation stops short. The state is indeed a precondition for liberty, but liberty, as Rousseau understood it, is itself a precondition for the republic of virtue. Free institutions are necessitated not only by humanity's natural equality and independence but also because they are essential to the creation of an authentic love of the *patrie* and the civic virtue that flows from it. This creates a happy circularity, in which political participation produces love of the *patrie*, which, in turn, creates a willingness to participate in politics when necessary. This happy circularity is the inverse of the famous paradox of founding in which citizens must be "prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of laws." (SC, iii:383; iv:156) According to this argument, citizens become by the process of lawmaking what they ought to become by means of laws. Put alternately, citizens make good laws when they legislate together on free and equal terms.

Although the *Social Contract*, Rousseau's best known political work, focuses on the institutions of freedom and self-governance, it is probably more accurate to say, as Rousseau wrote in the *Confessions*, that his purpose in composing a political theory was to answer this question: "What is the nature of government suited to forming a people that was the most virtuous, most enlightened, most wise, in sum, the best, taking this word in its most extended sense." (C, i:404–5; v:340) Rousseau's suggestion in the *Confessions* is that the argument of his political writings be read through the lens of civic virtue. The institutions of self-government, while formally necessitated by the principle of moral and political equality, were so dear to Rousseau for another reason: He regarded them as prerequisites to republican virtue. Republican virtue accompanies democracy, both as the prerequisite to the enlightened exercise of sovereign power and as its consequence. It is through self-government that citizens develop the fellowship and mutual respect that forms the basis for a republic of virtue. Rousseau reflects back on these arguments in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*:

What makes it so that the State is one? It is the union of its members. And from what is the union of its members born? From the obligation that ties them together. Up to this point, all are in agreement. But what is the foundation of this obligation? That is what authors are divided upon. According to some, it is force, according to others, paternal authority; according to others, the will of God. Each establishes his principle and attacks that of the others: I have not done otherwise myself, and following the soundest portion of those who have discussed these matters, I posited as foundation of the body politic the convention of its members, I refuted the principles different from my own. Independently of the truth of this principle, it prevails over all the others by the solidity of the foundation it establishes, for what more certain foundation can obligation among men have than the free engagement of the one who obliges himself? One can dispute every other principle; one cannot dispute that one.²⁰

Each of the putative foundations for political obligation has its merits, and Rousseau was willing to engage in the debate over which is preferable. However, what ultimately and definitively decided this debate in favor of popular sovereignty for Rousseau was that the principle of popular sovereignty fulfills the requirement not only of legitimacy but of unity as well. The others, whatever their claims to legitimacy, fail to inspire civic unity.

To have good laws is important, to have cherished laws even more so, such that Rousseau came to believe that a cherished law is a good one. Citizens must not only know the laws but “love them,” which is why “Lycurgus wanted to write only in the hearts of Spartans.” (*Fragment*, OC, iii.492) That reverence for the laws be heartfelt is usually regarded by Rousseau’s readers as useful for social stability—as a supplement for popular sovereignty. What I have tried to argue is that the reverse is equally the case. Institutions of self-governance allow for the possibility of making laws that express a patriotic bond, as opposed to laws that feel externally imposed. The former can be written in the hearts of citizens, even without a Lycurgus, the latter only rarely, and only ever *with* a Lycurgus or a similarly charismatic figure. Rousseau imagined a figure like this in his chapter on the Legislator in the *Social Contract*. Those societies fortunate enough to have a Legislator will have certain advantages with regard to formulating an authentic general will. However, the Legislator is an almost mythical figure for Rousseau, unlikely to ride in from the horizon of most societies. Most societies will have to find another way of confronting the paradox that Rousseau’s Legislator was created to resolve: “the social spirit, which should be the result of the institution, would have to preside over the founding of the institution itself.” (SC, iii:383; iv:156) Though the Legislator appears to perform a kind of miracle, Rousseau indicates that the paradox of founding can be resolved by other means. A combination of collective participation in self-governance, civic education, civil religion, public festivals, and so on, can bring about the same synergy between popular sovereignty and patriotic solidarity. Through these practices, the people become what they must be in order to ensure the rectitude of their deliberations. But their deliberations allow those practices to be solidified in turn. So things are not as pessimistic as Rousseau’s paradoxical formulation would suggest. In fact, cause and effect can be made to mutually reinforce one another, reversing the trajectory of Rousseau’s paradox of the effect becoming the cause.

Here Rousseau points toward an idea that would be developed to great effect by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*: popular sovereignty can be defended not only on the formal basis that it is the birthright of all human beings, each born equal to the others, none with an innate right to rule over the rest. In addition to this procedural defense, popular sovereignty can also be defended on the basis of the edifying effects it has on civic unity. Although Tocqueville believed that the people manage their affairs poorly, he noticed that in the process of participation, Americans had

developed a love of the *patrie* and a concern for the welfare of their fellow citizens. “As soon as common affairs are treated in common,” Tocqueville wrote, “each man notices that he is not as independent of his fellows as he used to suppose and that to get their help he must often offer his aid to them.”²¹ Tocqueville helps to make clear the dynamic by which the activity of participating in self-government can help to create the cultural backdrop for enlightened public deliberation.

Anna Stilz has developed an analogous reading of Rousseau, drawing on the nuanced account of *amour propre* in *Emile* to suggest how civic unity might emerge from ordinary social interactions. *Amour propre*, though frequently a cause of inequality and division, is “naturally neutral,” Stilz writes, and can engender a benevolent sentiment of fellowship.²² Stilz refers to this as “reflective identification” and suggests that it can “perform the functions required of civic solidarity” without recourse to an external agent such as the Legislator.²³

Rousseau’s account of reflective identification as the expression of *amour propre* under conditions of equality provides, I believe, precisely the kind of moral psychology necessary to the proper formulation of a general will.²⁴

Stilz nevertheless finds it peculiar that Rousseau would use both inculcated patriotism *and* free association to ensure the integrity of public deliberation.²⁵ Why the risky appeal to “extra-motivational resources,” Stilz wonders, when the salutary *amour propre* generated by free association appears to do the job? She echoes the concern of Hoffmann and Cohen expressed above. As she puts it, Rousseau “is always tempted to supplement an appeal to autonomy with the artificial bonds of a national culture.” These “extra motivational resources,” Stilz writes, “while compelling, at the same time threaten to subvert the politics of pure self-determination that [Rousseau] values.”²⁶

Stilz’s reconceptualization of *amour propre* suggests the presence of resources *internal* to social intercourse that operate to ensure the integrity of public deliberation. Are these internal resources sufficient? In most cases—Corsica being a possible exception—Rousseau suggests that internal resources will not be sufficient. For the most part, the forces *internal* to civic association, such as Stilz’s salutary *amour propre* or the collective participation in self-government that I have emphasized, will not suffice in and of themselves to ensure the integrity of public deliberation. There will remain a role for the government or a Lawgiver to play in ensuring that vanity and inequality do not compromise either the formulation or the implementation of the general will, to ensure, in other words, that inflamed *amour propre* does not supplant the reflective identification that Stilz associates with conditions of equality. The paradox of politics can be ameliorated but it cannot be eliminated.

Stilz effectively captures the paradox that sits at the core of the Rousseau's political theory: the reign of the general will depends upon resources ("the artificial bonds of a national culture") that subvert its own formal requirements ("pure self-determination"). We will not resolve this paradox, but we can mitigate it to some extent by extending Stilz's interpretation of *amour propre*. Stilz's re-reading of *amour propre* shows how, in a well-ordered society, the reciprocal action of citizens upon one another can produce the cultural backdrop required for the maintenance of the general will. As we have seen in this chapter, the same argument that Stilz makes with respect to *amour propre* can be made with respect to the activity of self-government. In the very act of coming together to deliberate, citizens elicit from one another the patriotic sentiments that, in turn, ensure the integrity and the implementation of the general will. While this does not do away with the tension between Rousseau's simultaneous insistence on patriotic solidarity and self-determination, it can mitigate it, as we will see in the following section.

III. The Legislator's Paradox or the Paradox of Politics

Rousseau's defense of republican principles is among the most influential in the history of political thought. This outsized and ongoing influence can be attributed, in part, to the way Rousseau's texts both articulate the fundamental principles of republican politics and reveal the problems inherent in that articulation. Perhaps the most fundamental problem associated with Rousseau's defense of republicanism is the tension between popular sovereignty and patriotism. For Rousseau, popular sovereignty and patriotism were equally critical to the success of a republican system of government, but each one of them, when pursued politically, risks compromising the other.

Scholars have generally agreed that there is indeed a tension between patriotism and popular sovereignty in Rousseau's political theory, captured by his paradoxical claim that citizens must be "prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of laws." (SC, iii:383; iv:151) Patrick Riley uses the language of "voluntarism" and "virtue" to capture this tension, while many others have treated the same problem in different terms.²⁷ Rousseau's interpreters have generally agreed on the existence and relevance of this tension; what they have argued over is whether this is a problem that can be resolved or whether it necessarily ends in contradiction. Rousseau's defenders imagine ways in which patriotism might be cultivated without compromising the liberty of the people to govern themselves, while his detractors argue that any putative solution will only reproduce the contradiction(s) it is intended to resolve. Whatever they decide about the ultimate viability of Rousseau's democratic project, all of these interpreters have treated love of the *patrie* as a regulatory constraint on popular sovereignty and not the other way around, which is to say, they treat love of the *patrie*

as a precondition for (not a consequence of) popular sovereignty. In other words, both those who think the tension between patriotism and popular sovereignty can be resolved *and* those who think it cannot begin from the assumption that Rousseau regarded patriotism as a prerequisite to good public deliberation and not as a product of that deliberation.

Rather than intervene directly into this debate, I have tried in this chapter to challenge an assumption underlying both ends of it. Both those who think the tension between patriotism and popular sovereignty can be resolved *and* those who think it cannot begin from the assumption that Rousseau regarded patriotism exclusively as a regulatory constraint on free public deliberation and *not* as a consequence of it. Both treat love of the *patrie*, in other words, as a condition of popular sovereignty rather than the other way around. On this reading, love of the *patrie*, is treated *either* as a precondition for popular sovereignty *or* as a threat to it. Excluded from this framing of the problem is the possibility that patriotism might be a *product* of the democratic process itself—a consequence of collective participation in self-government.

The interpretation of Rousseau's republicanism I have offered resituates the tension between patriotism and popular sovereignty, which Rousseau famously captured in what has come to be called the “Legislator’s paradox” or the “paradox of politics.”²⁸ If there are resources *internal* to the democratic process that help to perform regulatory functions previously thought to be dependent exclusively on resources *external* to that process, then the paradox of politics will turn out to cast less of a shadow over the democratic project than many had previously believed.

The felicitous dimension of popular sovereignty discussed above—the happy circularity, as we have called it—has not been acknowledged in treatments of the Legislator’s paradox. This paradox, oft-addressed by Rousseau’s readers, has been treated perhaps most thoroughly and compellingly by Bonnie Honig in an article titled “Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory.”²⁹ In this article, Honig reads the Legislator’s paradox as an instance of a broader “paradox of politics,” which she describes as an “irreducible binary conflict,” inherent in democratic politics. Rather than attempt to resolve this paradox (as, she argues, deliberativists like Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib do), Honig’s reading of Rousseau urges democratic theorists to preserve the Legislator’s paradox and formulate their arguments in conversation with it. The problem might be stated as follows: any putative articulation of the popular will or general will presupposes *something else* that makes that articulation good, or just, or legitimate. There is always a forgotten or unacknowledged moment prior to the articulation of the general will that enables that later moment of articulation. For Honig, the tension between what democratic citizens will and what they “ought” to will is irreducible. There is no way to simultaneously honor the principle of popular sovereignty and to ensure the integrity of public deliberation. Attempts to do so replicate the dynamic

they are meant to transcend. “There is,” Honig writes, “no getting away from the need in a democracy for the people to decide. . . . Appeals to god or divine power do not escape this predicament, they replay it.”³⁰

For Honig, Rousseau’s insight into this problem is one his most significant contributions to political thought. His “political understanding of law and maybe of rationality” precludes any appeal to constraints on public deliberation that purport to transcend politics (of the kind we find, for example, in Kantian philosophy).³¹ Consequently, Rousseau is able to recognize the paradox of politics that follows from his revolutionary defense of popular sovereignty. But Rousseau ultimately disappoints, on Honig’s reading, because he conveys the inexorable nature of the paradox of politics only at the moment of founding and not as a permanent feature of democratic politics. Elsewhere, he makes appeals to factors that are meant to overcome the paradox and create the conditions for what Honig refers to as “successful general willing.” She lists these conditions as “defined and sheltered territory, small population, relative equality, civic religion.”³²

It is here that the reading of Rousseau offered in this chapter becomes particularly relevant. If what we have said about the trajectory of Rousseau’s argument is correct, then Honig’s list does not do full justice to Rousseau’s account of the resources available to address the Legislator’s paradox. For Honig, the only resources available to steer “democratic particularity” toward “universal equality” are *external* to it. Honig does not account for the resources made available by democracy itself—the resources *internal* to the process of democratic will-formation. This internal dynamic of democratic deliberation suggests that proponents of democracy are not consigned to “hope,” as Honig puts it, that democracy can be better than the people it governs.³³ The activity of democratic participation itself can generate enlightened citizens via the ameliorative effects of participation in self-government. (Here we might again invoke Tocqueville to supplement Rousseau, as well as the work of contemporary theorists influenced by Tocqueville, who have documented the salutary effects of democratic participation.³⁴) So, in addition to the paradox of the effect becoming the cause, democracy produces a happy circularity whereby the cause produces the effect and the effect serves to reinforce the cause.

None of this should be mistaken for an argument that the Legislator’s paradox can be overcome or that Rousseau believed this to be the case. There will always be an ultimately inexorable kernel of tension even after the various strategies of amelioration have been employed. But Honig refers to the paradox of politics not merely as ineliminable or ineradicable or inexorable; she refers to it rather as “irreducible.” She argues, in other words, not only that the paradox of politics cannot be eliminated, but that it cannot be reduced. She commits to a thoroughgoing claim about the futility (at best) or coerciveness (at worst) of attempts to mitigate the paradox of politics, to reduce what she calls the tension between deliberation and decision and we have referred to as the tension between voluntarism

and virtue. Any such attempt, Honig seems to be suggesting, will automatically re-enact the paradox it aims to ameliorate. The best a democratic politics can do is “set the material conditions . . . to relieve the propensity toward a conflict between the general will and the will of all.”³⁵ Honig is convincing in demonstrating that the gap between the will of all and the general will can never be closed. However, the question remains as to whether anything might be done about that gap—as to how that gap might be minimized—not under the illusion that it could ever be eliminated, but with the understanding that democratic deliberation and good decision-making are equally central, though not always harmonious, components of a just society. This is a paradox indeed, but it is not one for which there is no recourse. Rousseau proposes many resources for reconciling the will of all and the general will. One (generally neglected) resource is the active, ongoing participation in the democratic process itself, the responsibility for (and habit of) taking the interest of others into account.

Although Honig initially refers to the “paradox of politics” as an “irreducible binary,” she later suggests that it might better be seen as a “vicious circle.”³⁶ With the image of a circle (as opposed to a binary), we can begin to think about the mutually reinforcing action of popular sovereignty and patriotism. The question would then become whether this circle is inherently vicious, as Honig posits, or whether, under the right circumstances, it could also be felicitous, as my reading of Rousseau suggests. On one hand, democratic deliberation can never be wholly immunized from the influence of fear and scapegoating or mystification; any attempt to undertake such immunization will inevitably reproduce the Legislator’s paradox. This is the ineradicable (though not irreducible) tension that will forever accompany democratic politics. On the other hand, when it is active and equitable, the process of public deliberation itself can elicit from citizens the virtues upon which its success depends. Another way of making this point would be to recommend a more expansive conception of “the people.” In Honig’s account, “the people” acts a placeholder for a protean public sentiment, which takes shape on the basis of the varying beliefs, passions, myths, or reasons that may possess it at any given time. Honig does not include in her conception of the democratic public what we might call, following Tocqueville, the steady action of democracy upon itself or, alternately, the steady action of democratic participation on democratic sentiments. So, while it is true, as Honig says, that there is no getting around the fact that, in a democracy, the people decide, there is more reason to be hopeful about that prospect than she suggests.

This gives us a bit of good news with respect to Rousseau’s dual commitment to the inculcation of patriotic solidarity and the free and equal participation of citizens in their own governance. Both values are served by republican institutions. The best way to cultivate patriotic solidarity is to ensure free and equal access to the deliberative process. In this way, at least, there is a synergy between Rousseau’s formal principles of political

right (republican institutions of self-government) and the experience that ultimately redeems the political project (civic communion).

Once we understand this, we can begin to mitigate the tension between popular sovereignty and civic virtue, which is at the center of so much of the scholarship on Rousseau's political theory. Zev Trachtenberg, for example, in an essay on Hobbes and Rousseau, characterizes Rousseau as running into trouble by consequence of his insistence on popular *participation* in the exercise of sovereign power.³⁷ (Hobbes, by contrast, posited that sovereign power would be *delegated* by the people to the government.) Trachtenberg takes Rousseau's requirement of popular participation in the exercise of sovereignty to place a heavy burden on the acculturation and education of citizens, to the point that their liberty could easily be rendered redundant. This argument derives its force from the assumption that the education of popular will necessarily antecedes the formulation of popular will. Once we understand that the process of democratic will-formation is as much the condition for patriotic solidarity as it is the consequence, the tension that Trachtenberg identifies changes from a dead end to an open canvas upon which we can begin to think productively about the challenges of democratic politics.

Like Trachtenberg, Alan Keenan, to take another particularly insightful example, is concerned about what he refers to as "elements and actions in democratic politics that prove *necessary* to the people's autonomy without being reducible to its logic."³⁸ Popular sovereignty, as Rousseau imagined it, requires a cultural backdrop (patriotism), the cultivation of which may subvert the very idea of popular sovereignty itself. Keenan describes the problem especially well. However, he too imagines a linear model, whereby the virtues required for autonomous legislation are instituted prior to the inception of any legitimate democratic politics. It is therefore useful to complicate Keenan's description of democratic will-formation in Rousseau. This process turns back on itself, as the popular exercise of sovereign power, the integrity of which Keenan sees as *conditional* upon a united, virtuous citizenry, becomes one of many *sources* of civic unity. In *Democracy in Question*, Keenan describes a series of "interventionist strategies," justified as necessary to the unity of the democratic body, but which themselves always already presuppose the kind of unity they are supposed to produce.³⁹ Economic equality, for example, one of Rousseau's prerequisites to good governance, cannot be achieved democratically, Keenan argues, unless "those conditions are already in place."⁴⁰ This argument generates its power from the assumption that the process of will-formation moves in one direction. It presupposes that legislation favoring economic equality can emerge only once citizens themselves *already* favor economic equality. Left out of this analysis is the possibility that an open political process will itself encourage norms of equality that will, in turn, result in legislation supportive of that value. The solidarity that Keenan implicitly treats as a precondition for public deliberation is itself, in part, a consequence of it. Keenan's analysis, like Trachtenberg's, presupposes a moment of autonomous legislation, in

spite of his claims to the contrary. This moment of authentic, autonomous legislation is an impossibility, the pursuit of which will inevitably disappoint. However, this moment is not the centerpiece of Rousseau's political theory. The centerpiece is rather the patriotic communion that both drives the process of democratic legislation and emerges from it.

Because these critics assume that the vector of analysis in Rousseau's political theory goes in only one direction—from the education of citizens to the formulation of the general will—they conclude that he failed in his attempt to combine freedom and rectitude. However, if we think about the education of popular will and its formulation as mutually reinforcing processes, then this classic problem in Rousseau studies is mitigated. Democratic societies will always have to negotiate the tension between virtue and voluntarism, but the problem becomes less intractable once we see popular sovereignty as something more than an empty repository of an antecedently enlightened will. Popular sovereignty, as Rousseau conceived of it, is a process through which laws are formulated *and* norms of patriotic solidarity are reinforced. Rousseau's interpreters tend to assume that civic virtue is the prerequisite to the formulation of the general will, but it is, as we have seen, just as much the consequence of it. When citizens have little or no say in their own governance, they are unlikely to form bonds of republican solidarity, and, even if they do, those bonds will likely be externally imposed rather than internally generated. Conversely, when citizens participate collectively in self-government, they enter into meaningful relationships with their compatriots, relationships that encourage a concern for the welfare of others and build a love of the *patrie*.

Reading Rousseau's political theory this way helps us avoid the mischaracterization that would paint Rousseau as an enemy of liberty. If uniformity is the precondition for liberty, then it must be imposed whatever the cost. However, if free institutions are the precondition for patriotic virtue, then it becomes impossible to read Rousseau as the enemy of difference or personal liberty. Rousseau's various strategies for building solidarity and inculcating virtue must be seen as a *product* of democratic will-formation as much as a *prerequisite* to it.

IV. Two More Paradoxes

When we reverse the trajectory of Rousseau's political argument, or, more accurately, when we read it as a self-reinforcing circle rather than as a linear progression, we are able to mitigate not only the Legislator's paradox but two other paradoxes that have long been central to Rousseau studies and, for that matter, to democratic theory more broadly.

i. Individualism and Collectivism

Rousseau's republicanism has frequently been read as alternately (and problematically) committed to both individualism and collectivism. Arthur

Melzer, for example, writes, “the power of the state over the individual and of the citizens over the state must both be brought to a maximum.”⁴¹ Rousseau’s controversial solution to this tension was to argue that collectivism is the condition for individual liberty—that only an austere collectivism could overcome the forces of inequality and inflamed *amour propre* that menace individual liberty. Much of the interpretive work on Rousseau’s political thought has focused on just how successful this ostensible solution actually was. Some have maintained that the general will provides a context in which personal liberty and individualism can flourish, while others have argued that the austere conditions of the general will subvert personal liberty before it is ever able to emerge.

This discussion, like the discussion of the Legislator’s paradox, can be reinvigorated by attention to the desire for communion, which animates both Rousseau’s collectivist and individualist moments. For Rousseau, individual liberty was to be guaranteed not only by *right* but also because it is the *condition* for an authentic, unmediated communion of hearts. While Rousseau understood the difficulty of reconciling particular and general will, this problem did not exist *in the form* that it does for many of his interpreters. Rousseau viewed individual liberty as a precondition for the unmediated *communion des coeurs*, upon which he would ultimately judge political life. So, for him, while particular and general interests *could* (and probably would) come into conflict, there was no *necessary* tension between the two, because individual autonomy was the precondition for an authentically felt communion of equal citizens.

Political success requires both individual autonomy and a collective identity. Citizens must, in other words, come together freely and forge a mutual commitment. This has puzzled interpreters interested in classifying Rousseau along the individual/collective or progressive/traditional axes. It appeared to Albert Schinz, for example, that Rousseau’s embrace of tradition in the *Government of Poland* was as an abandonment of the radicalism of the *Social Contract*: “the revolutionary became the reactionary.”⁴² For Schinz, Rousseau’s radical, democratic theory of sovereignty could not be reconciled with his preference for cultural conservatism. However, when we read Rousseau through the lens of patriotic communion, it becomes clear that both Rousseau’s radical, democratic argument and his cultural conservatism are defended not as ends in themselves but as necessary to a *communion des coeurs*. A republic of virtue is the product of both procedural and substantive solidarity. Procedurally, Rousseau was a radical democrat. Substantively, he was a traditionalist. Both collective participation in self-government and adherence to traditional mores are necessary to political unity. In fact, as a society democratizes, it is that much more important that it guard its mores. Democratic procedures produce a sense of shared ownership and traditional mores produce shared affection.

Free to participate in self-government, citizens will incline toward those customs, mores, and traditions that draw them closer to one another. This was the principle that allowed Rousseau to reconcile his radically

democratic theory of sovereignty with his endorsement of cultural conservatism. “No one,” Rousseau wrote, “wants the public good except when it agrees with his own.” (*LB*, iv:937; ix:29) Individuals, therefore, do not sacrifice self-interest for the sake of something else; rather, they pursue their personal, political interest. This can seem counterintuitive, but, if the ultimate purpose of political association is a *communion des coeurs*, then we can see how pursuing the public good would be in our personal interest.

This argument assumes, as Rousseau did, that there *is* a shared interest among the members of a community and that this shared interest is not built upon the systematic exclusion of any subgroup within that community. Every member of the community is asked to subordinate his or her selfish interests to the interests shared by the community as a whole, but no member of the community may be justly excluded from the protection of the general will. Rousseau’s argument thus presupposes the existence of a community of people, self-identified as such, with an objectively identifiable, common set of interests. Critics going back to Benjamin Constant have regarded this assumption as both implausible—inasmuch as it imposes a non-existent generality on particularity—and dangerous—inasmuch as it marginalizes dissent and justifies the arrogation of power by a political elite claiming to represent the will of the people.⁴³

Those interested in responding to Constant’s critique have typically relied on a procedural argument about the preconditions for what, following Honig, we might call “successful general willing.” On this account, the shared interest that supplies the content of the general will is conceptualized as preceding the articulation of the general will by the people. Successful general willing is understood as the accurate perception of that shared interest by the people (who are sometimes helped along by variety of social supplements, such as a sheltered territory, small population, relative equality, and civic religion, which orient them toward their shared interest). However, what Stilz shows in her analysis of *amour propre* and what I have tried to show here with respect to participation in self-government, is that the citizenry’s sense of itself and of its shared interests can emerge dynamically in the general process of democratic will-formation. It need not be a static, predefined entity that the sovereign people access and announce at the moment the general will is issued. The general will, in this sense, names not only the product of a well-ordered polity, but the *process* by which a well-ordered polity organizes itself.

This sets up a self-reinforcing interaction between self-government and civic solidarity, which is the basis of the general will. As Steven Affeldt has argued, the coercive force in Rousseau’s system is supplied mainly by the mutual activity of citizens upon one another rather than by government sanction.⁴⁴ While the government must be responsible for holding citizens to the law, much more critical to the flourishing of a republican society is the capacity of citizens to exert cultural pressure upon one another to commit themselves to the cultivation of a shared identity and to the privileging

of shared interests. In the *Government of Poland*, Rousseau counsels the Poles to become “accustomed . . . to living with the eyes of their fellow citizens upon them.” (iii:968; xi:181) Citizens in a flourishing republic will encourage one another to focus on issues of common concern in public life, while confining particular interests to the private sphere.⁴⁵ Rousseau gave the same advice to Corsica. You must govern yourselves, Rousseau wrote in his proposed constitution for Corsica, but, when you do, you ought to do so by “maxims taken from your own experience.” (Cor, iii:903; xi:125) You *will* govern yourselves, Rousseau seems to be saying, for that is the sole basis of political legitimacy, but if you are to govern yourselves well, he counsels, you will do so on the basis of traditional principles. Rousseau’s preference for the democratization of sovereignty is unmistakable, but he recognizes that popular will has rectitude only if mores direct affection outward, a dynamic that requires respect for tradition.⁴⁶

I do not want to deny that Rousseau faced a real problem in the question of the relation of the individual to the community. What I would suggest, however, is that an emphasis on that problem obscures another, which was more fundamental for Rousseau. Rousseau was more concerned with the question of mediation than he was with the reconciliation of the individual and the collective, in part because mediation was for him the barrier to both individual liberty *and* collective identity. An unmediated, solidaristic community of equals was for Rousseau the only context in which individual liberty could flourish. In other words, he regarded politics as the context within which citizens unite around principles of individual liberty, both because those principles are essential to political legitimacy but also because they are a precondition for republican communion—the only thing that makes life in society preferable to solitude. The importance of a solidaristic community acts as the animating principle of Rousseau’s political argument; it is both the precondition of, and the ultimate purpose of, political association.

ii. Difference and Faction

It is commonly argued that Rousseau’s emphasis on civic unity renders his political theory hostile to differences of political opinion or identity. Indeed, this is where a politics grounded the presumption of generality would seem to be at its weakest. It is useful, in this context, to distinguish between difference and faction and to consider the impact of each on political communion. Of the role of government, Rousseau wrote, “The end of government is the accomplishment of the general will; that which prevents it from arriving at this goal is the obstacle of particular wills.” (*Political Fragment*, OC, iii:485) Particular will constitutes the greatest threat to the dominion of the general will, but, by this, Rousseau did not mean that particular will could or should be eliminated. The presumption that Rousseau’s society will be homogeneous is false. It will gladly tolerate differences—“the general will would always result from the large number of small differences”—so long

as those differences do not coalesce into factions, defined as “partial associations at the expense of the large one.” (SC, iii:371; iv:147) Unity was a prerequisite to political flourishing for Rousseau, but unity was necessary *only* with respect to politics; outside of political life, Rousseau understood difference as inevitable and even insisted that tolerating it was necessary to political success. Respect for difference was essential to unity, as paradoxical as that may sound, because citizens will embrace the political body only if they are welcomed into it.

The term “State,” for Rousseau, referred to the body politic in its capacity as sovereign legislator and subject of sovereign power. Matters of the state were those of common concern and common consensus.⁴⁷ In ideal conditions of perfect cultural homogeneity, state and society would merge, and the space of public deliberation could encompass all social affairs. However, inevitably, conditions will not be ideal, and a multitude of differences will pervade the social body. Those differences, in and of themselves, constitute no threat to the general will, so long as they remain in the (largely untheorized) private space that exists alongside the public space of the social compact.⁴⁸ Indeed, these small differences *must* be tolerated, according to Rousseau, if citizens are to build solidaristic bonds around those issues upon which they do agree.

Societies should actively cultivate as many commonalities as possible, Rousseau counsels, but nothing says that these commonalities must come at the expense of difference. In fact, the bulk of Rousseau’s argument points to the opposite conclusion: that commonality will be cultivated through respect for small differences. The threat to the general will comes not from difference, but from a single association becoming so big it “prevails over the others.” (SC, iii:372; iv:147) When Rousseau describes the threats to political unity, he does not speak against difference but rather against those who fail to honor it: “You must think as I do in order to be saved. This is the horrible dogma that desolates the world.” (GM, iii:341; iv:122) Individuals sharing a given partial interest are to be tolerated by the state right up until the moment those individuals form a faction, defined as having the active intent to subject the state to their will: “One should tolerate all those religions that tolerate others. . . . But whoever dares to say *there is no salvation outside the church* should be chased out of the State.” (SC, iii:469; iv:223–4)

In the chapter on civil religion in the *Social Contract*, it is not religious diversity that Rousseau sees as a problem; it is rather religious intolerance, which he characterizes as no different from civil intolerance. (SC, iii:460; iv:216) The civil religion is designed not to impose a dogma but to generalize dogma, so much so that its sole proscription is intolerance. As Claude Lévi-Strauss put it, for Rousseau, “the one inexpiable human crime” was “believing oneself superior.”⁴⁹ As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, Rousseau’s civil religion is ecumenical. It is monotheistic, not for doctrinal reasons, but because monotheism creates the possibility of universal

inclusion. The civil religion is not an alternative to religious diversity. It is rather the *condition* for social cohesiveness and solidarity in a context of religious diversity. It is intended not to coerce belief but to prevent coercion.

Rousseau criticized Christianity not for its doctrine but for creating obstacles to universal inclusion, for having established its own “body,” for becoming a “second sovereign,” and thereby precluding the “political unity,” without which no State or government will ever be “well constituted.” (SC, iii:462–3; iv:218) Hobbes, in Rousseau’s view, wisely proposed a reunification of the two sovereigns. However, he did not understand the “dominating spirit of Christianity . . . and that the interest of the priest would always be stronger than that of the State.” (SC, iii:463; iv:218) Rousseau’s concerns about particularity pertained not to diversity or the free exercise of religion, but to the accumulation of power in partial associations, which Rousseau thought acted at the expense of the common interest and for the sake of a particular one.⁵⁰

Rousseau distinguished between the natural rights that we are entitled to as human beings and the obligations we owe to the state. This was more than just a principle of political right; it was a practical imperative as well. It was how the *communion des coeurs* was to be achieved. Differences were to be tolerated not in *lieu* of a united population but as a prerequisite to it. If we are to unite together around a set of shared interests, we must feel as though our differences will not come under attack by the newly founded polity. Otherwise, we would never willingly agree to the “total alienation of each associate, with all his rights to the whole community.” (SC, iii:360; iv:138) So, respect for private differences is not just a requirement of political legitimacy; it is also a critical component of the political culture that supports the sovereignty of the general will. Rousseau admired Polish federalism, for example, not because it fostered diversity, but because it respected diversity while limiting its potentially harmful effects on political unity. By assigning space for regional differences, Polish federalism allowed national unity to follow. (GP, iii:998; xi:205)

Rousseau’s political theory emphasizes unity but does not get there through coercion or homogenization; it gets there through the toleration of small differences. That is how a political body is constituted. The state is constituted, in other words, the way reverie and moral education are—not by imposing communion but rather by opposing the forces that prevent it.⁵¹ It is important that Rousseau’s attack on faction be read in context. The barrier to unity, in Rousseau’s mind, was not diversity, as we now commonly understand it. The barrier was rather *intolerance* for this kind of difference by powerful, partial associations such as the government, the Church, and the aristocracy—all of which threatened to undermine social unity through their assault on small differences.⁵² Rousseau’s solution was to tolerate differences while depoliticizing them, such that politics could be grounded in

what citizens hold in common. The depoliticizing of difference may not seem like much of a solution to today's reader, but it is a far cry from the notion that Rousseau's republic of virtue could not tolerate differences of political opinion or identity.

In resituating the relationship between love of the *patrie* and popular sovereignty, I have tried in this chapter to show how the *Social Contract*, often regarded as incongruous with Rousseau's broader *corpus*, might be placed comfortably alongside *Julie*, *Emile*, and the *Reveries*, as an account of the conditions that make for human happiness. The reading offered here also invites readers of Rousseau to break away from the question that launched a thousand essays on his political thought:

Is Rousseau's argument for popular sovereignty and personal liberty subverted by the preconditions he places on the legitimate exercise sovereign power?

Some have answered this question in the affirmative, others in the negative, but none have considered the reformulation of the question proposed here. What if, as we have suggested, love of the *patrie* is not only a precondition for popular sovereignty but also a consequence of it?

By pushing beyond a formal reading of Rousseau's political theory, we are able to discern a substantive argument for democracy, grounded in love of the *patrie*. Civil solidarity, on this reading, becomes not just a supplement for popular sovereignty but the very reason for entering civil society. Political association becomes a viable pathway to the recuperation of the "truths that pertain to human happiness." And the paradox of the effect becoming the cause is mitigated by the happy circularity by which popular sovereignty and patriotism are mutually constituted. This reformulation mitigates tensions in Rousseau's work between voluntarism and virtue, the individual and the community, the particular and the general. This is achieved by adding a third option to our framework for conceptualizing the relationship between popular sovereignty and patriotism. What if patriotism is more than either a precondition of the just exercise of sovereign power or a threat to the just exercise of that power? What happens when patriotism is conceptualized as a *consequence* of the free exercise of sovereign power? Once we incorporate this latter dimension of Rousseau's republicanism into our understanding of his political thought, we multiply the options available for thinking through the classic problems in Rousseau studies and in democratic theory more generally.

Notes

- 1 Robert Derathé, “La notion d’égalité dans Rousseau,” in R. A. Leigh ed., *Rousseau after Two Hundred Years* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 58. Derathé locates Rousseau within the context of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century natural law theorists for whom rights, in particular the right of consent, were particularly significant. Consequently, Rousseau appears as a thinker focused on rights, the law of nature, and the limitations on sovereignty. This approach underplays the ways in which Rousseau instrumentalized the formal principles of political right. In addition to operating as ends in themselves, these principles were also important preconditions for patriotic communion.
- 2 Stanley Hoffmann, “‘Du Contrat Social’ ou le mirage de la volonté générale,” *Revue internationale d’histoire politique et constitutionnelle* 16 (1954) 303.
- 3 Joshua Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 22.
- 4 The phrase appears in *Political Economy*, amidst Rousseau’s extolling of the power of “love of the fatherland,” which he describes as, among other things, a “sweet and ardent feeling” and “the most heroic of all the passions.” iii:255; iii:151.
- 5 Ironically, the political path to the essential, immediate truths of human happiness was a highly mediated one. The path to personal independence and republican fellowship requires the total alienation of each associate. “Properly understood, all of these clauses come down to a single one, namely the total alienation of each associate, with all his rights, to the whole community.” (SC, iii:360; iv:138) The independence and immediacy of the state of nature, it turns out, is recaptured in society only when citizens agree to a thoroughgoing dependence on their fellow citizens.
- 6 Jennifer Einstahl argues that mediation infiltrates *all* of Rousseau’s invocations of immediacy, including even the savage’s sentiment of existence. “The Beginning that Never Was: Mediation and Freedom in Rousseau’s Political Thought,” *The Review of Politics* 72 (2010) 43–61. Einstahl, it should be noted, does not challenge the centrality of immediacy as a regulative ideal for Rousseau’s conception of freedom or the good life; she is interested instead in exploring the ways in which Rousseau’s desire for immediacy is frustrated.
- 7 It is important to distinguish between democratic sovereignty and democratic government. (See Book III of the *Social Contract*.) The former enunciates the general will, while the latter executes it. Rousseau regarded democratic sovereignty as a condition of political legitimacy but not so for democratic government. In fact, he thought the people as a whole would have a difficult time implementing the general and believed it best to delegate that responsibility to a smaller group. When I use the language of democracy in this chapter, I am referring to the legislative and not the executive element of the political process. The nature and extent of the government’s role in influencing the formulation of the general will has been the subject of much discussion. Ethan Puterman has made the case that the government initiates legislation in Rousseau’s system, consulting the people only for its approval. “Rousseau on Agenda Setting and Majority Rule,” *American Political Science Review* 97 (August 2003) 459–9. John Scott argues conversely that the sovereign both initiates and ratifies legislation. “Rousseau’s Anti-Agenda-Setting Agenda and Contemporary Democratic Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 99 (February 2005) 137–44.
- 8 Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 96. Roger Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton University Press, 1968).

- 9 Judith Shklar, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality," *Daedalus* (Summer 1978) 24.
- 10 Masters, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, 382.
- 11 Rousseau's claim is supported by survey research on the "contact hypothesis," which holds that bigotry is less common among those who have personal contact with members of a stigmatized group. See, for example, G. M. Herek and E. K. Glunt, "Interpersonal Contact and Heterosexuals' Attitudes toward Gay Men: Results from a National Survey," *Journal of Sex Research* 30 (1993) 239–44.
- 12 *Du Bonheur Public*, OC, iii:511.
- 13 It is worth noting, that, historically, the relationship between popular sovereignty and social solidarity has mirrored the relationship I am proposing here. As Bernard Yack has shown, "wherever popular sovereignty leads, nationalism seems to follow." Yack, "Popular Sovereignty and Nationalism," *Political Theory* 29 (2001) 517–36.
- 14 Rousseau's Legislator (SC, book II, chapter vii) is often understood as an external source of domestic unity. Below I explain why I believe this reading to be insufficient.
- 15 David Lay Williams helpfully describes the general will as incorporating four elements. It (1) "must issue from the will of some agent or agents," (2) "derives from the people," (3) "applies to all equally," and (4) "tends to be implemented through fraternal love among citizens." "Spinoza and the General Will," in James Farr and David Lay Williams eds., *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 126.
- 16 In *The Natural Goodness of Man*, Arthur Melzer acknowledges the mutually reinforcing relationship between patriotism and self-government: "Patriotism, for example, is inseparable from direct democracy, in Rousseau's view. Only where the citizens are actively involved, knowing that they control the state, will they be inspired with genuine loyalty and devotion." (107) However, Melzer does not draw out the theoretical implications that follow from this principle. Instead, he treats patriotism as a supplement to popular sovereignty, characterizing patriotism (and the civil religion) as "'moral and institutional reinforcements,'" without which the majority will fail to express the general will. (176–7) Here Melzer leaves out what he had earlier acknowledged—that these "reinforcements" are equally the *product* of institutional arrangements that make the general will sovereign. They ought to be understood, therefore, not merely as reinforcements, but as integral components of democratic will-formation.
- 17 "Our sweetest existence is relative and collective," Rousseau wrote in the *Dialogues*, "and our true *self* is not entirely within us." (D, i:813; i:118)
- 18 Bronislaw Baczko's work is critical here, because he is one of the few Rousseau scholars to place political unity at the center of his interpretation. For example, in *Rousseau: Solitude et communauté* (Paris: Mouton, 1974), Baczko writes that in Rousseau's political theory, "Political institutions are subordinated to the unity of the society." (329)
- 19 "This set of conceptual possibilities can be summed up by saying that the rational state might relate to the freedom of its members either as a *precondition* or as an *embodiment* of that freedom." Frederick Neuhouser, "Freedom, Dependence and the General Will," *The Philosophical Review* 102 (1993) 365.
- 20 Rousseau, *Letters Written from the Mountain*, iii:806–7; ix:231.
- 21 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Perennial, 1969) 10. It is only through "the reciprocal action of men one upon another," Tocqueville adds, that "feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged and the understanding developed." (515). "What is meant by 'republic' in the United States is the slow and quiet action of society upon itself." (395)

- 22 Anna Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty: Freedom, Obligation, and the State* (Princeton University Press, 2009) 123.
- 23 Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty*, 127.
- 24 Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty*, 127.
- 25 Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty*, 136.
- 26 Stilz, *Liberal Loyalty*, 136.
- 27 See Patrick Riley, *Will and Political Legitimacy* (Harvard University Press, 1982), as well as Riley, "Rousseau's General Will: Freedom of a Particular Kind," in Robert Wokler ed., *Rousseau and Liberty* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995) 1–28. This issue has been addressed by scores of writers, many of whom are discussed in this text. For an example, see W. T. Jones, "Rousseau's General Will and the Problem of Consent," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* XXV (January 1987) 105–30.
- 28 Rousseau states the paradox as follows: "In order for an emerging people to appreciate the healthy maxims of politics and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit, which should be the result of the institution would have to preside over the founding of the institution itself; and men would have to be prior to the laws what they ought to become by means of laws." (SC, iii:383; iv:151) Bonnie Honig, drawing on William Connolly's work, has usefully called the Legislator's paradox the "paradox of politics," recognizing the universality of the problem Rousseau's formulation is meant to illustrate. For Connolly's treatment, see *Political Theory and Modernity* (Basil Blackwell, 1988), especially pp. 52–7 and *Ethos of Pluralization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), especially pp. 137–49. Honig's treatment of the paradox is discussed below.
- 29 Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007) 1–17. Much of this article appears in revised form in *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Although the Legislator's paradox has been treated by many others, some of whom are addressed in this chapter, I have chosen to focus on Honig's reading, which is both representative and exceptionally insightful.
- 30 Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 7.
- 31 Honig, *Emergency Politics*, 21.
- 32 Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 7. Alan Keenan, who is discussed below, creates a similar list: (1) laws that establish and maintain a minimum level of equality . . . ; (2) the Legislator's cultivation of a public spirit; (3) censorship; (4) civil religion. *Democracy in Question* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) 51.
- 33 Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 1.
- 34 See, for example, Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2000); and Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).
- 35 Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 8. The will of all designates for Rousseau the mere aggregation of particular wills, as opposed to the general will, which represents the common interest willed collectively by each citizen. (SC, iii:371; iv:147) While there is no necessary conflict between the two, Honig is correct in noting that, in practice, there will be a gap, not only because some citizens will fail to privilege the common interest over their private interest but also because some will be mistaken about the common interest. (Rousseau takes as a first principle that there is a singular, identifiable common interest in any society and that this common interest is the basis for the general will.)
- 36 Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation," 7.

- 37 Zev Trachtenberg, "Subject and Citizen: Hobbes and Rousseau on Sovereignty and the Self," in Timothy O'Hagan ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Sources of the Self* (Brookfield, VT: Avebury, 1997).
- 38 Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 50. Joshua Cohen has tried to work through this problem by distinguishing between what he calls "rhapsodic moments" in which Rousseau exalts "complete civic unity" and his "philosophically liberal" commitment to a "free community of equals." (Cohen, *Rousseau: A Free Community of Equals*, 36, 22) Cohen tries to work out a compromise position, which describes Rousseau's commitment to civic unity as the precondition for "advancing the public good"—as "motivationally necessary" to the general will. This now well-worn way of "saving" Rousseau is carried out impressively in Cohen's treatment, but is nevertheless constrained by the assumption that generality serves a regulatory function with regard to popular sovereignty and not vice versa. As long as civic unity is treated exclusively as the precondition for general willing and not also as its consequence, Rousseau's conception of the relationship between civic virtue and popular sovereignty will be partially obscured, and he will be forever caught in what we have called the Legislator's paradox—that the people must be before the law what they are to become by means of it.
- 39 Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 51.
- 40 Keenan, *Democracy in Question*, 52.
- 41 Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, 98. As C. E. Vaughn put it, "When all is said, the two rival elements, the individual and the community are left not so much reconciled, as in ill-veiled hostility, to each other." *The Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1915) I.5
- 42 Schinz, "Introduction" to *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in OC, iii:cxcvii.
- 43 Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003)
- 44 Steven Affeldt, "The Force of Freedom," *Political Theory* 27 (1999) 299–333.
- 45 This is why tolerance is so critical to Rousseauian politics. Private differences must be tolerated, as a condition of public unity.
- 46 In the *Letter to D'Alembert*, Rousseau is perhaps at his most nuanced with respect to both the urgency of cultivating republic mores (*moeurs*) and the difficulty of doing so without compromising other values. It is fellowship that determines the success of a society, Rousseau argues, and so the mores of society exceed in importance any laws, which stand or fall on the basis of the public opinion that supports them. (*LDA*, v:61–2; x:300). As for how that fellowship is to be cultivated, Rousseau is necessarily ambiguous—necessarily, I believe, because it is impossible to know which methods will be consistent with the personal liberty of each associate in any given context: "As to the choice of instruments proper to the direction of public opinion, that is another question which it would be superfluous to resolve for you and which it is not here the place to resolve for the multitude. I shall content myself with showing by an evident example that these instruments are neither laws nor punishments nor any sort of coercive means." (*LDA*, v:62; x:300)
- 47 Substantively, the decisions generated in democracy will be good, so long as differences are put aside and deliberations focus on the common interest: "It should be understood from this that what generalizes the will is not so much the number of votes as the common interest that unites them, because in this institution everyone necessarily submits himself to the conditions he imposes on others, an admirable agreement between interest and justice which confers on common deliberations a quality of equity that vanishes in the discussion of private matters, for want of a common interest that unites and identifies the rule of the judge with that of the party." (SC, iii:374; iv:149) Later, Rousseau writes,

- “. . . the sovereign knows only the nation as a body and makes no distinctions between any of those who compose it.” (*SC*, iii:374; iv:149–50)
- 48 Prior to entering into the social compact, associates “set aside . . . everything that is not of the essence of the social compact.” (*SC*, iii:361; iv:139) Later, Rousseau adds, “Indeed, each individual can, as a man, have a private will contrary to or differing from the general will he has as a citizen.” (*SC*, iii:363; iv:140–1) See also *SC*, iii:373; iv:148: “. . . in addition to the public person, we have to consider the private persons who compose it and whose life and freedom are naturally independent of it.”
- 49 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “J.-J. Rousseau fondateur des sciences de l’homme,” in Samuel Baud-Bovy ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1962).
- 50 In the *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau addresses the issue of coerced conformity: “In society, everyone has the right to find out whether another person believes himself obligated to be just, and the sovereign has the right to examine the reasons on which each person bases this obligation. Moreover, national forms ought to be observed; I have insisted upon that greatly. But as for opinions that are not connected to morality, that do not influence actions in any way, and that do not tend to transgress Laws, each person has only his own judgment as a master on these, and no one has either right or interest in prescribing his way of thinking for others.” (iv:973; ix:57)
- 51 “What makes the work of legislation difficult is not so much what must be established as what must be destroyed.” (*SC*, iii:391; iv:162)
- 52 This is to read Rousseau as a precursor to Will Kymlicka, for example, as opposed to Charles Maurras or any of the other reactionary nationalists who were attracted to Rousseau’s defense of civic unity. Tolerance of difference was for Rousseau, as it is for Kymlicka, not an alternative to unity but a precondition for it. See *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

6 Religion

Though one would scarcely know it from the Anglophone commentaries on his work, Jean-Jacques Rousseau thought and wrote a great deal about religious questions, ultimately producing what amounts to a comprehensive theology.¹ Substantively, Rousseau's religious thought was similar to the deism common to many eighteenth-century philosophers: belief in God, the afterlife, the punishment of the wicked, and tolerance for doctrinal differences. What distinguished him from most of his contemporaries was the political role he envisioned for religion. While most eighteenth-century deists were concerned primarily to divest religious leaders of any political authority, Rousseau hoped to preserve a role for religion in political life. Acutely sensitive to the dangers posed by religion to the freedom of citizens, Rousseau nevertheless believed religion to be indispensable to republican societies. These societies, he argued, must find a way of eliminating the repressive tendencies of established religion while preserving the salutary aspects of religious communion. Toward that end, Rousseau's writings on religion reimagine traditional Christianity in terms that honor individual conscience. Under Rousseau's reconstituted principles of Christian devotion, respect for personal liberty becomes more than an article of political expedience—it is transformed into an obligation of faith.

A variety of questions, both theological and political, emerge from Rousseau's reconstructed principles of faith. Most immediate, perhaps, is the question of Rousseau's status as a Christian, a subject that is beyond the scope of this work but has been addressed elsewhere.² More pressing, with respect to the interpretation of Rousseau I am pursuing in this book, is the ambivalence—some might say inconsistency—that characterizes Rousseau's critique of Christianity. In the *Profession*, *Letter to Beaumont*, and in many letters, Rousseau attacked Christianity as sectarian and dogmatic. In the *Social Contract*, by contrast, Rousseau criticized Christianity for its universality and consequent impotence with respect to the cultivation of political unity. We might say that Rousseau criticized Christianity on the grounds that it is both excessively general *and* excessively particular. The more familiar criticism pertains to Christianity's cosmopolitanism—its excessive generality—which Rousseau described as incompatible with the

republican requirement of civic unity. However, of even greater concern to Rousseau was Christianity's tendency toward sectarianism—its excessive particularity—which he regarded as incompatible with personal liberty. Like the majority of Rousseau's writing on Christianity, this chapter focuses on this latter concern—the problem of Christianity's particularity. However, in studying Rousseau's response to the problem of particularity, we will also gain insight into the problem of generality. This is because Rousseau's attempt to reconcile Christianity with personal liberty tells us something about how republican societies might go about particularizing a civic faith while respecting the individual's freedom of conscience.³

It is often argued that Rousseau never successfully reconciled his ecumenical theology with his political argument for an exclusive civil religion. In reading Rousseau's writings on religion through the lens of communion, this chapter mitigates the tension between Rousseau's theology and his political theory. Just as the practice of reverie and the practice of popular sovereignty present canvases upon which subjects are enabled and empowered to pursue communion, so too does Rousseau's theology open up a space for the cultivation of religious and political solidarity. Rousseau's writings on religion, I will show, are structurally parallel to his writings on his other preferred pathways to truth: reverie, republicanism, and, to a lesser degree, reason. All of these are reliable pathways to truth, in Rousseau's view, provided that they are pursued within the constraints of autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility. This framework suggests a reconciliation of Rousseau's political and religious writings. Rousseau's *religion naturelle* and the republic of virtue prove to be alternate but complementary paths to the same “truths that pertain to human happiness,” to which Rousseau claimed to have dedicated his writings and his life.

Both religious faith and civic virtue point toward the same essential truth, which I have described as communion. Neither religious faith nor civic virtue are ends in themselves in Rousseau's writings but are rather judged by him on the basis of their capacity to move human beings closer to the communion that the savage and solitary experience as communion with nature, that the citizen, Julie, and Emile experience as a *communion des coeurs*, and that the religious believer experiences as communion with God and with her fellow believers. All of these pathways to communion lead away from the division visited upon human beings, not by a constitutive insufficiency in the soul, but by consequence of our decision to build civilization on inequality and *amour propre*. Both the republic of virtue and the *religion naturelle* (including a properly conceived Christianity) can overcome the divisions of modern society, so long as they are pursued in accordance with the criteria of autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility.⁴ All of these facilitate communion, which Rousseau sought throughout his works, whether in the form of the collectivism of the *Social Contract* or the solitude of the *Reveries*.

As already noted, most students of Rousseau's religious thought have concluded that this reconciliation does not work. Pierre-Maurice Masson

and Yves Touchefeu, authors of the two great works on Rousseau's religious thought, for all of their differences, agree that Rousseau failed in this regard—that his attempts to reconcile religion and citizenship did not succeed.⁵ Touchefeu argues that Rousseau's aspiration to be both citizen and Christian *could not* succeed, because the two ideals are radically opposed.

In an effort to reconcile these two demands, he only succeeded in revealing a new fissure at the very center of religion. He demonstrated what separated the particular religion of the city and the universal religion of the Gospel.⁶

In trying to reconcile civic and religious obligations, Touchefeu argues, Rousseau succeeded only in further dramatizing their irreconcilability. Paul de Man, too, makes much of the theoretical “gap” or “conflict between the theophany of the Profession and the political writings.”⁷ However, Rousseau himself described the civil religion as substantively consistent, if not quite identical to, the Savoyard vicar’s *Profession of Faith*. The difference, to the extent that one exists, was, for Rousseau, a difference of perspective not substance. The same “truths that pertain to human happiness” are described through political and spiritual lenses in Rousseau’s politics and theology respectively.

In order to make this case, it will be necessary to distinguish between what Rousseau called the “religion of man” (also the “religion of the Gospel” and the “natural religion”) and the “religion of the citizen.” (SC, iii:464; iv:219) The ancient religions were “religions of the citizen” because everything was subordinate to an “external cult prescribed by . . . laws.” (SC, iii:464; iv:219) The vicar’s profession is a “religion of man,” intended for all human beings as human beings, regardless of political affiliation and independent of it. The religion of man is the “pure and simple religion of the Gospel, true Theism.” (SC, iii:464; iv:219) In addition to these two, there exists also a third “more bizarre” type of religion that, “by giving men two legislative systems, two leaders, and two fatherlands, subjects them to contradictory duties, and prevents them from being simultaneously devout men and citizens.” (SC, iii:464; iv:219) It is this third religion, which Rousseau called the “religion of the priests,” that posed a threat not only to Rousseau’s republicanism but to his theology, as well. Difficulties arise, in other words, not so much from the need to reconcile the ostensibly solitary religion of man with the manifestly social religion of the citizen, but from the threat posed to *both* the “religion of man” and the “religion of the citizen” by the “religion of the priests.” Because the “religion of man” and the “religion of the citizen” both aspire toward *communion*, their obvious differences prove surmountable. Both are grounded in Rousseau’s principles of truthseeking—autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility—and both aim at *communion*. By contrast, the “religion of the priests,” much like the philosophies of most public intellectuals, aims at the aggrandizement of a few and is grounded in dogmatism, mediation, and ceremony. Both the

“religion of man” and the “religion of the citizen” are equally undermined by the “religion of the priests.”

All of this points toward a reconciliation of the demands of politics with the demands of faith, which Rousseau believed he had achieved in the vicar’s profession of faith and in Book IV of the *Social Contract*. The texts are substantially different, of course; they address dramatically different questions. It probably goes too far to say, as Rousseau himself did in a variant to the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, that “this civil religion is precisely that of the priest of Savoy.” (OC, iii:1593) It is fair to say, however, that Rousseau regarded the vicar’s distillation of the fundamental principles of faith as having captured the essence of Christianity, while at the same time laying a foundation upon which any civil religion may build.

I. Communion

Rousseau was less concerned to investigate the nature of truth than to scrutinize the pathways human beings have followed in pursuit of it. What we conclude was less important for Rousseau than how we arrive at our conclusions.⁸ However, he did identify a few “truths that pertain to human happiness,” which appear frequently and consistently throughout his writings: original goodness, the sovereignty of justice, and the joy of communion, whether with God, nature, or other human beings. Communion is the sublime reward for both the austerity of republican citizenship and for participation in God’s divine order.⁹

In the first *Discourse*, we already find Rousseau defending both patriotism and Christianity together against the threat posed to them by mediated reason. Later, in Rousseau’s outline of a civil religion, he will explain how Christianity and republican citizenship can be, even must be, reconciled. Rousseau’s version of Christianity (which, it must be said, may not be recognizable to many Christians) was not at odds with his account of republican virtue; the two were, in his view, different but complementary paths to the same immediate truths of existence. Both encourage the sacrifice of self-interest to a higher morality; both produce a love of one’s fellows; and both are susceptible to corruption when intermediaries (priests or the government) interfere with the unmediated communion of subjects (with God or with one another).

Christianity, Rousseau believed, risks division and subjugation when intermediaries come between believers and God. So long as one listens to God’s voice itself, these problems do not arise. Jesus speaks simply and directly to each person, through the voice of God (which Rousseau also refers to as “conscience” or the “inner voice”) and through Scripture, properly interpreted.

Rousseau’s theology was spare and tended always toward communion.

Let us teach men to see themselves as the instruments of a supreme will, which unites them with one another and with a greater whole; to despise the evils of this short life which is nothing but a return passage

to the eternal being from which they derive their existence; and to love one another as brothers destined to one day reunite within the embrace of their common Father. (*Fragment*, OC, iv:1048)

Here, as in the following passage from the *Confessions*, we find Rousseau pining for a return to what he imagined to be an original, pristine, undifferentiated origin, the perfect communion, where there was nothing but communion, because no differentiation had yet occurred:

Oh nature, oh my mother, here I am under your protection alone; here there is no clever and deceitful man who comes between you and me. (C, i:644; v:539)

Rousseau sought in Christ the same communion he sought in politics and in reverie:

I join in my heart with the true servants of Jesus Christ and the true adorers of God to offer him the homages of his Church in the communion of the faithful. It is consoling and sweet for me to be counted among its members, to participate in the public worship they offer to the divinity, and to say to myself in their midst: I am with my brothers. (LB, iv:961; ix:47)¹⁰

When this kind of brotherhood was at stake, Rousseau willingly changed his sectarian affiliation from Protestant to Catholic and back again. After the publication of *Emile*, Rousseau was compelled to flee Paris in order to avoid persecution for the deistic ideas expressed in the *Profession*. He sought refuge in Neuchâtel, which was controlled at the time by the King of Prussia. Rousseau writes of the pleasure he took in participating in Holy Communion. For Rousseau, the essence of the religious experience lay in this communion, simultaneously with God and with his new “brothers:”

I found an extreme sweetness in being able to say to myself, “At least I am among my brothers,” and I went to communion with an emotion of heart and tears of tenderness which were perhaps the most agreeable preparation for God that one could bring. (C, i:605; v:506)

This sentiment of communion could be achieved in either a Protestant or Catholic context, and so Rousseau eagerly returned to Protestantism when he settled in Neuchâtel.

I will not hold forth on the innumerable, baseless, trivial objections that have been directed at me and that continue to be directed at me every-day. I know how to tolerate in others ways of thinking that are different to my own so long as we are all united by J.C.; that is what is essential.

Monsieur, I want only to renew the declaration of my firm and sincere resolution to live and die in the communion of the Protestant Church. Nothing consoled me more in my misfortunes than to make my sincere profession alongside you; I ask you my Pastor, and my fellow parishioners to find it in yourselves to continue the same kindnesses . . . (CC, to Pasteur Montmollin, November 1762, 2299, xiv:40–41)

Put aside the doctrines that separate believers, Rousseau counseled, and make unity the anchor of religious life. The rewards of a life led this way can be enormous. What mattered most was that people prayed together, lived as brothers, and placed universal concerns above sectarian ones. Any additional doctrinal provisions are neither good nor bad in themselves, but become so only insofar as they contribute to these goals.¹¹ Explaining his willingness to return to his native faith, Rousseau wrote of his new brethren: “In agreement with them about the principles of duty, I do not argue about the rest, which seems to me to be of very little importance.” (CC, to l’abbé Alexandre-Louis-Benoit de Carondelet, 4 March 1764, 3166, xix:200)¹²

While it is clear from these passages that Rousseau’s religious quest had communion as its endpoint, the question remains as to whether this religious communion was the same communion Rousseau sought in the republic of virtue. Readers of the *Social Contract* may want to argue—reasonably—that Rousseau’s criticism of Christianity was less about its tendency toward divisiveness than it was about its tendency toward cosmopolitanism. Indeed, Rousseau was concerned, in the *Social Contract*, about Christianity’s tendency to encourage *overly* expansive bonds of communion—cosmopolitan inclinations that implicitly diminish the strength of the social bond. This is the basis of Toucheieu’s claim that the vicar’s natural religion and the *Social Contract*’s civil religion are irreconcilable. Toucheieu argues that Rousseau’s political science cannot be reconciled with his theology. He claims that the *Profession* espouses precisely the values that Rousseau had condemned in the *Social Contract*.¹³

I will consider this argument in more detail below (section III), but as a beginning, it is helpful to keep in mind that Rousseau defended the same religious tenets in the *Profession* and the *Social Contract*:

The existence of a powerful, intelligent, beneficent, foresighted, and providential divinity; the afterlife; the happiness of the just; the punishment of the wicked; the sanctity of the social contract and the laws. These are the positive dogmas. As for the negative ones, I limit them to a single one: intolerance. (SC, iii:468–9; iv:223)

Rather than leave any confusion, the vicar made clear that his intention was to describe the principles inherent in all legitimate religions, not to propose an alternative: “I regard all the particular religions as so many salutary institutions.” (E, iv:627; xiii:475) While Christianity, as explained by the priests,

could not be reconciled with Rousseau's republicanism, Rousseau insisted that religion would be central to any successful revival of republicanism. Rousseau's was not opposed to Christianity *per se*, but to what he regarded as the priests' appropriation of it. Rousseau's own non-doctrinaire revision of Christianity was intended to synthesize the advantages of the civil religion and the religion of man (though it was decried by both political and religious authorities).¹⁴

In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau imagined a society within which the vicar's *Profession* had been adopted as principles of faith. Proselytes, Rousseau wrote, would have "two rules of faith that make up only one, reason and the Gospel. The latter will be all the more immutable because it will base itself only on the former." (*LM*, iii:697; ix:142). The Gospel will, in other words, be interpreted according to reason, not "definite facts," which need to be "attested" and which, therefore, "put religion back under the authority of men." (*LM*, iii:697; ix:142). This hypothetical society's rules of faith will shrink Christian doctrine, while intensifying believers' commitment to it. Sectarian differences can be exclusionary and so should be treated as incidental or "ceremonial," to use Rousseau's language.

Rousseau's patently sincere affection for his experiences of Christian fellowship should temper the significance we attach to Rousseau's sweeping criticism of Christianity in the *Social Contract*.¹⁵ While, in that text, Rousseau had described Christianity as incompatible with the virtues of republican citizenship, in the *Letters Written from the Mountain* (as elsewhere) he suggests that Christianity properly understood—the religion of the Gospel—could be the basis for a civil religion. As we will see below (section III), religion is critical to the republic of virtue, and Rousseau understood that any foreseeable Genevan (or European) civil religion would have to be grounded in some interpretation of Christianity. While the religion of the priests cannot be rendered compatible with the demands of republican politics, the vicar's interpretation of it can be and must be, if a republic of virtue is to flourish. A civil religion is essential to political communion, which was, for Rousseau, the terminal political value—the justification for political life itself.

II. Rousseau's Revised Christianity

"Everything," Rousseau wrote at the start of the *Emile*, "is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man." (iv:245; xiii:165) This principle animates all of Rousseau's works; it is the most basic of the "essential truths" necessary to human happiness. Rousseau believed that God had placed human beings into a natural state, in which they possessed everything they needed to be happy and to commune with the Divine. Autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility are all principles that follow directly from *amour de soi* and the sentiment of existence—the constitutive impulses of human nature. It is only upon entry into society that human beings placed intermediaries between themselves

and God. And Christianity, under the dominion of the priests, did as much to exacerbate this problem as it did to remedy it. In developing his own religious thought, Rousseau was compelled, therefore, to challenge some of the basic principles of Christian theology: original sin, miracles, prayer, and priestly authority among others. In order to accommodate these concerns, Rousseau undertook a reinterpretation of Christian doctrine, designed to render it consistent with the values of personal liberty and communion.

i. Autonomy

Religious understanding, Rousseau insisted, must be personal—much the same as any other pathway to truth. To understand God, one must develop one's own understanding of Him. Correspondingly, Rousseau has the vicar begin the *Profession* with the following:

Has God not told everything to our eyes, to our conscience, to our judgment? What more will men tell us? Their revelations have only the effect of degrading God by giving Him human passions. (*E*, iv:607; xiii:459)

God's goodness is universally accessible, without recourse to anything other than our own faculties. It has nothing whatever to do with “particular dogmas,” which add “absurd contradictions.” God is surrounded by “inconceivable mysteries,” the vicar argues, setting a Calvinist tone that persists throughout the *Profession*. In positing an unknowable God, the vicar invalidates *prima facie* all claims to fully understand God, and, by implication, all persecution in the name of God. When human beings claim to have a monopoly on the truth of God, religion becomes “proud, intolerant and cruel,” where it should be humbled by those “inconceivable mysteries” and tolerant of well-intentioned attempts to understand them. (*E*, iv:607; xiii:459) It is revelation, not religion that is responsible for much of the “sword and fire” of human civilization.

As soon as peoples took it into their heads to make God speak, each made Him speak in its own way and made Him say what it wanted. If one had listened only to what God says to the heart of man, there would never have been more than one religion on earth. (*E*, iv:608; xiii:460)

Our knowledge is limited (and enabled) by our faculties, and, therefore, we must trust only those insights that we can validate through them. Truth, as always in Rousseau's writings, must be personal; it must be one's own, which means that, epistemologically, truth must be equally available to all. The vicar continues:

All the theology that I can acquire on my own from the inspection of the universe and by the good use of my faculties is limited to what I have

explained to you previously. To know more one must have recourse to extraordinary means. These means could not be the authority of men; for since no man belongs to a different species from me, all that a man knows naturally I too can know, and another man can be mistaken as well as I. When I believe what he says, it is not because he says it but because he proves it. Therefore, the testimony of men is at bottom only that of my own reason and adds nothing to the natural means God gave me for knowing the truth. (*E*, iv:610; xiii:462)

The vicar could not have been suggesting by this that no person can have an extraordinary understanding of God. Rousseau's writings clearly indicate the opposite. The vicar's meaning must be, rather, that this truth is not of the kind that can be taken on the authority of others. This kind of truth must be personally discovered through one's "own reason." Those who help us grasp theological principles do so not by virtue of their unique access to the Divine, but rather by making plain something that we too could have come to understand independently. There exist no "extraordinary means," beyond autonomous contemplation, by which we can commune with the Divine. Some will listen more closely to the voice of God, while others will be unable to escape the influence of *amour propre*, but no one will grasp the truth by submitting to external authority.

Religious communion requires an initial openness, a willingness to listen: "Begin by putting your conscience in a condition where it wishes to be enlightened," the vicar counsels. (*E*, iv:630; xiii:478)¹⁶ Next, personalize God's message: "Be sincere with yourself. Make your own those of my sentiments which have persuaded you. Reject the rest." (*E*, iv:630; xiii:478). Here we have Kant's injunction, "Dare to think for yourself," though in a Rousseauean context, the injunction is closer to, "Dare to *feel* for yourself."

Rousseau argued that traditional Christianity posed two broad concerns with respect to this conception of religious liberty: first, the denial of human beings' original goodness; and, second, the insertion of intermediaries between believers and God. The former precludes self-sufficiency with respect to earthly happiness and eternal salvation, while the latter inhibits the liberty of believers to cultivate a personal relationship with the Divine. The first concern led Rousseau to question the doctrines of original sin and grace, as well intercessory prayer; the second led him to question the authority of the clergy, even of Scripture itself.

Original Sin

It was Rousseau's belief in "original goodness" that drove the injunction, *Feel for yourself!*, just as it animates the whole of his philosophical system. Rousseau's insistence that we listen to our heart, trust our instincts, and turn away from the influence of those who claim to know, derives from his belief in original goodness. The less mediated, the less sophisticated our

reflection, the more reliable. This fundamental principle places Rousseau's religious thought in tension with much of traditional Christian doctrine, but, perhaps most obviously, it is at odds with the idea of original sin. Rousseau's theodicy was, in a sense, the antithesis of traditional Christianity's: Human beings are born good and must struggle to remain true to themselves. Jesus's divinity, on this account, lies not in the sacrifice he makes for our sins but in the example he sets by consecrating himself to justice. For the traditional Christian, we are born sinners and are destined to be at war with ourselves. Jesus's divinity lies in the sacrifice he made for humanity's innate sinfulness, a sacrifice that creates the possibility for redemption. The traditional Christian looks forward, toward redemption in the next life, while Rousseau's theodicy points backward, toward original goodness. Whereas the traditional Christian turns himself over to Christ, Rousseau urges us to turn toward ourselves, to listen to our hearts in order hear the voice of God. This, Rousseau believed, was what Jesus himself had done, and in so doing, he had been able to speak to human beings in a moral language to which they had become deaf.

If religion is to be a pathway to truth, it must be rendered consistent with Rousseau's fundamental principle of original goodness. Human beings, in their natural state enjoyed a simple happiness as a consequence of their unmediated communion with God and nature. They were autonomous with regard to everything, including their spiritual life, needing nothing more than their own faculties to experience the *sentiment pur de l'existence*. No intermediaries were required to commune with God. Neither are any required for us, provided that we use our faculties as God intended. God speaks to each one of us, so long as we are ready to hear Him, but we must hear Him *ourselves*, since his voice cannot be translated by those calling themselves priests. In order for all of this to make sense, it cannot be the case that human beings are born into sin, born, that is, with a constitutive lack or insufficiency. While Rousseau understood the importance of renouncing sin and turning to God, he believed that the sins we must renounce are socially constituted and not inherent in human nature.¹⁷ Whereas the traditional Christian narrative points toward the afterlife as the only path to redemption, Rousseau believed redemption to be available in this life, provided we turn away from the empire of opinion and *amour propre* and return to the simple pleasures of communion. Rousseau's piety was premised on the view that *this* life is good, that we should rejoice in our participation in it and be grateful to God for it.

According to Christian orthodoxy, Christ's intercession is required for salvation because human beings are constitutively marked by original sin. This creates an insufficiency in the human soul, which can be made sufficient only by a turn toward Christ. Only Jesus Christ can compensate for this insufficiency, because Christ, and only Christ, sacrificed himself so that human beings could be redeemed. Although Rousseau agreed that the human soul is marked by an insufficiency, he attributed that insufficiency to the process

of civilization and socialization, not to a constitutive flaw in human nature.¹⁸ For Rousseau, human nature is itself our redemption, the source of salvation, that toward which we must turn if we are to escape our sinful tendencies. This return to oneself, to one's nature, is not a turning away from God (as many of Rousseau's contemporaries asserted) but a turn toward God. God, Rousseau believed, has given humanity everything we need to be happy.¹⁹ Salvation is, therefore, available to us in this life, if we turn toward God and follow the example manifested for us in the life of Jesus.

While Rousseau spoke of a fall from grace, for him, the fall was a consequence of the formation of human societies, not an original sin. There is no equivalent of the tree of knowledge in Rousseau's state of nature; prior to the formation of societies, human beings had not yet alienated themselves from God. Sin or corruption (to use Rousseau's language) is not something we are born with; it is rather artificial—the product of artificial needs and of human artifice. There is no need for self-renunciation, no need to turn one's life over to God in order to be redeemed, because God has already given us everything we need to redeem ourselves. Jesus, while divine, was not the only pathway to God: "What purity of morality, what dogma useful to man and honorable to his Author can I derive from a positive doctrine which I cannot derive without it from the good use of my faculties?" (*E*, iv:227; xiii:145.)²⁰ Jesus offers an example, which every human being can imitate, provided they listen closely to their heart.

Divinity

Rousseau's understanding of the Divine makes it accessible to all those willing to listen, though it speaks to each person differently. God's goodness suffuses the world. Accessing it requires neither sophistication nor an intermediary; it is eternal wisdom, inscribed in the hearts of all human beings. God, Rousseau wrote, is "sole master of changing my heart and my reason." (*LB*, iv:962; ix:48) We are to rely on our inner voice, which is also God's voice, in order to grasp the truth, and, perhaps more importantly, we are to rely on no other voice. This means that it can never be just for anyone—priest or otherwise—to assert themselves as an "arbiter of my belief." (*LB*, iv:961; ix:48) Priests had successfully excluded Rousseau from the Church, but they could never prevent him from "being joined in [his] heart to the faithful." Rousseau distinguished this independence of mind from that of "nominal Christians," who are "always ready to believe what must be believed or say what must be said for their interest or repose." (*LB*, iv:961; ix:48) Rousseau's own piety was highly personal. He wanted Jesus himself to judge him and vowed never to give in to the pressure to retract his views, a vow to which he was true (even as he converted from Protestantism to Catholicism and back again). God speaks to each of us, which means that we need not rely on *témoignage* (testimony); we are all witnesses to holiness, so long as we turn toward it and trust the voice by which he speaks to us.

We cannot be brought to faith through doctrine; faith must be autonomous, just as reason and reverie should be. The contemporary Calvinist Marilynne Robinson captures Rousseau's conception of the divine:

I believe holiness is a given of our being which, essentially we cannot add to or diminish and whose character and reality are fully known only to God and fully valued only by him. What I might call personal holiness is openness to the perception of the holy. . . .²¹

Rousseau's faith yields an openness more than a certainty. The religious spirit he sought was not surrender to authority but surrender to mystery. He conceded that he was not in possession of a "robust faith which never doubts anything." (*LB*, iv:963; ix:49) What he sought in religion was access to the same eternal truths that human beings perceive, sometimes more clearly than others, in a variety of registers. He was not after certain resolution of every moral dilemma. Rousseau's faith was grounded in an acceptance of God's infinite wisdom and humanity's relative limitations. It disallowed dogmatism, facilitating what Rousseau hoped would be a willingness within the individual believer to hear God's voice and be awed by it. Rousseau lamented that his fellow Europeans, if they heard God spoken of at all, were less likely to be in awe than to be in fear of Him. This, Rousseau felt, had nothing to do with God; it had everything to do with alienation, which precludes awe and marvel, leaving only fear. (*DI*, iii:24; ii:18)

Rousseau felt weak before God's greatness; he was "overwhelmed" by it. (*LB*, iv:959; ix:46) This disposition requires the pious to circumscribe their reflections about God, approaching them with trembling, wonder, and modesty, under the recognition that human beings are "not made to plumb their depths." (*E*, iv:581; xiii:438). Faith in God means accepting these limitations and remaining steadfast in one's belief in the goodness of existence, despite, perhaps even because, we lack the ability to fully understand it.²² The presence of a divine existence beyond human understanding is itself a wondrous gift to the human imagination. It is a source of poetry, creativity, and openness to difference.

None of us can know God in Himself. Although God exists independently of his creations, our understanding of Him is limited to his works:

I perceive God everywhere in His works. I sense Him in me; I see Him all around me. But as soon as I want to contemplate Him in Himself, as soon as I want to find out where He is, what He is, what His substance is, He escapes me, and my clouded mind no longer perceives anything. (*E*, iv:581; xiii:438)

Because a comprehensive understanding of God is beyond the grasp of the human intellect, no one of us can claim to know God better than another. This means, first, that the religion of the priests is simply arrogance, but,

more importantly, it means that piety will be experienced as gratitude, reverence, joy, blessing, exploration and mystery, rather than as obedience and ritualism. If we can know God only through His works, then there is effectively no difference between the person who, calling herself a Christian, delights in God's creation and the nonbeliever who does the same. God is effectively, if not literally, isomorphic with His attributes. Our understanding of God is a composite of His attributes, because that is the only way we can understand Him.

It is the order produced by God that is the basis of Rousseau's piety; anyone able to rejoice in that order can, therefore, be considered pious. In the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, Julie laments Wolmar's atheism not because it leads him to immorality, but rather because it prevents him from *delighting* in his participation in the moral order. Gratitude toward God is directed, then, not at His teaching, which is available elsewhere as well, but rather at the delight made possible by communion with the Divine. God issues no positive commands. (Human beings make Him do so for their own purposes.) God is rather the force that induces joy and gratitude for the sentiment of existence. God's grace is a gift for which He demands nothing in return, and worship a gift we give to ourselves when we open our hearts to the divine spirit.

Clergy

The vicar offers a highly personal profession of faith rather than an excursus on Christian doctrine, and he repeatedly counsels the young Rousseau to follow his heart. Rousseau's theology was anti-doctrinal and, therefore, anti-hierarchical. If there is no fixed doctrine and religion is a personal relationship to the divine, then there is no need for a body of clergy to propagate religious doctrine. Indeed, a clerical hierarchy becomes an impediment to personal redemption. God's message is to be felt rather than debated. Those who would assert for themselves the authority to make religious pronouncements do so for their own sake rather than for God's.²³ In this, they parallel the philosopher who feigns dedication to truth while pursuing personal ambitions.

Rousseau leaves Emile's choice of religion up to him:

To what sect shall we join the man of nature? The answer is quite simple, it seems to me. We shall join him to neither this one nor that one, but we shall put him in a position to choose the one to which the best use of his reason ought to lead him. (*E*, iv:558; xiii:419)

Which specific “sect” one chooses is almost irrelevant; *that* one choose it is critical. At the political level, Rousseau's advice is the analogous: First, do not introduce a new religion—there is no need, because the good ones are all

fundamentally the same. Second, do not discriminate against existing sects (for the same reason).

Rousseau admired the socio-political function a Church could fill, but he derided the Church's vision of itself as the sole and exclusive repository of divine revelation. Rousseau made it clear in the *Letter to D'Alembert*, for example, that our own conscience and reason are our best guide to truth. They trump even Scripture:

. . . if the Scripture itself gave us some idea of God unworthy of Him, we would have to reject it on that point, just as you reject in geometry the demonstrations which lead to absurd conclusions. For, of whatever authenticity the sacred text may be, it is still more believable that the Bible was altered than that God is unjust or malevolent. (*LDA*, v:12; x:259)

Disciples of Jesus Christ were not, in Rousseau's view, authorities on the nature of divine wisdom or on the status of Jesus Christ as a manifestation of the divine; they were rather living manifestations of the divine. They embodied Jesus's "predilection . . . for the lowly and the simple." (O, iii:45; ii:45) Humility and charity were their primary virtues, which made them incapable of intolerance, dogmatism, or persecution.

Rousseau was adamant that he was a Christian—not as a disciple of the priests but as a direct disciple of Jesus Christ himself. Jesus cared little for doctrine, requiring his followers only to believe in what was necessary to be good: "The person who loves his brother has fulfilled the Law." (*LB*, iv:960; ix:47) This is what made the *Profession*, in Rousseau's view, the most important of his works. The vicar's teaching renders religion (including Christianity) consistent with reason and the principle of toleration. "Divine truth is neither mine nor yours," Rousseau wrote in the *Letter to Beaumont* (citing Augustine). (iv:967; ix:53) The vicar lays the foundation for a personal, autonomous relationship to the divine, with which outsiders must (almost) never interfere.²⁴

Developing a personal conception of God was far more important to Rousseau than was obedience to Him. For this reason, Emile's tutor postpones his religious instruction until he reaches the age of reason. Young children, because they are incapable of conceiving of an infinite being who transcends the senses, imagine instead an embodied being. Their religious instruction must be delayed until they are able to conceive of concepts like the infinite. Now, for the archbishop of Paris, this recommendation constituted proof that Rousseau did not believe knowledge of God to be necessary for salvation. Otherwise, he would have made sure his pupil was prepared to be judged from an early age. But Rousseau was willing to delay religious instruction for the same reason that he did not believe baptism to be a requirement for entry into heaven. Neither is necessary

for salvation because both presuppose that human beings are born into sin. (*LB*, iv:946–7; ix:36–7) They presuppose, in other words, that we begin our life alienated from God and must climb into His grace. Rousseau believed the opposite—that we are close to God by nature and stray from His divine voice only as we become a part of society.

Prayer

Rousseau's favorite religious activity was not prayer but “contemplation.” In contemplation, Rousseau strove for an unmediated communion with nature, including the physical world without and the sentiment of existence within. In practicing this form of religious communion, Rousseau generally left the house. He did not enjoy praying indoors, explaining that he found the walls too confining, representative of all the petty concerns that human beings interpose between themselves and God. Rather than pray to God from indoors, Rousseau preferred to “contemplate” Him “in his works,” where His presence is most easily sensed. (*C*, i:236; v:198) Rousseau contrasted this kind of contemplation to praying for compensation or recompense. Prayers that ask for God's active intervention are unnecessary. God, on Rousseau's view, has placed us into a world in which we are self-sufficient with regard to morality and happiness. Intercessory prayer is, therefore, incompatible with Rousseau's natural religion, except when it is expressed as gratitude for having been given access to the joy of existence. Prayer for God's active intervention is inconsistent with the principle of immanence and with the premise that, God has given us everything we need to be happy. Rousseau has the vicar describe how he communes with God:

I meditate on the order of the universe, not in order to explain it by vain systems but to admire it constantly, to worship the wise Author who makes himself felt in it. I converse with Him; I fill all my faculties with His divine essence; I am moved by His benefactions; I bless Him for his gifts. But I do not pray to Him. What would I ask of Him? That He change the course of things for me, that He perform miracles in my favor? I who ought to love, above all, the order established by His wisdom and maintained by His providence, would I want this order to be disturbed for me? . . . Not to be contented with my condition is to want no longer to be a man, it is to want something other than what is, it is to want disorder and evil. Source of justice and truth, God, . . . [i]n joining my will to Yours, I do what you do; I acquiesce in Your goodness; I believe that I share beforehand in the supreme felicity which is its reward. (*E*, iv:605; xiii:457–8)²⁵

This model was so far from the practice of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches of Europe, that Rousseau, in spite of his self-professed piety, not to mention his ardent defense of religion in the first *Discourse*, could

be seen by many of his contemporaries (as well as more recent commentators) as not himself religious.²⁶ However, what Rousseau rejected was not religion but religious dogmatism, which he despised not as religion but as dogmatism. Rousseau claimed to be a man of faith and a Christian, and, while he departed from Church orthodoxy, there is no reason to doubt his professions of faith. What Rousseau rejected was intolerance masquerading as religion.²⁷

For Rousseau, all religious doctrine beyond the most essential principles of faith was “ceremonial.” God would never have made human flourishing dependent on an elaborate external apparatus, such as a body of clergy or a written text, however sublime. Religion is essential to human flourishing, but the apparatus of the Church is not. In Rousseau’s view, there was no greater threat to true religion than the Church itself. The role of the Church, then, like the role of reason, the state, and all educational institutions, must be primarily negative—to provide a clearing through which human beings may rediscover the truths that were immediately available to them in their natural state. The clergy have a role in society, but this role cannot be fulfilled through coercion or indoctrination. It must be modeled along the lines described in the education of Emile and in the vicar’s profession of faith. The Church, if it is to serve religious truth, must consecrate itself to facilitating a personal, individualized relationship to the divine for each of its members.

ii. Immediacy

Rousseau’s great burst of philosophical and literary activity was inspired, he relates, at the sight of a sign posted on the road to Vincennes in 1749. Rousseau took up the pen not after having thought or reasoned about fundamental questions but in response to an epiphany about them. Seeing those words, arranged as they were, in the form that they were, produced a reaction in Rousseau that propelled him into a literary career. “Has the rise of the arts and sciences contributed to the purification of morals?” It is significant that the rationale for this personal and intellectual transformation was felt or sensed more than reasoned or argued. The illumination on the road to Vincennes—the birth of the Rousseau we know—embodies, in a single instance, the whole of Rousseau’s philosophy of truth. In the illumination, truth is felt, simply, immediately and personally, without any external intervention.

Truth, which the savage sensed immediately in the state of nature, has become harder to access in society, because society introduces a series of mediations between human beings and the natural order. Indeed, as I argued in chapter three, a compelling case can be made that mediation most accurately defines Rousseau’s account of the alienation of human beings from their natural state. Property, language, and the development of tools—those things frequently associated with this departure—are all instances of mediation.

If mediation is the source of our alienation, it follows that, if we are to regain access to the “truths that pertain to human happiness,” we will need to re-connect or re-commune with the natural order. The sight of the Dijon Academy’s posting provoked this experience in Rousseau, after which his life—his literary life at least—was never the same. Rousseau’s opera, poetry, and plays were almost exclusively written prior to his revelation on the road to Vincennes; after the revelation, Rousseau abandoned—if we are willing to take him at his word—his attempts to win success with Parisian intellectual society. At the moment of his illumination, his outsider status was confirmed, and he was finally able to consecrate himself to the truth.

Was the revelation on the road to Vincennes a religious revelation? Rousseau certainly interpreted it that way.²⁸ He believed that God had spoken to him in that moment, saying to him something very like what he said to Jesus: Simplify your faith. Much of the rest of Rousseau’s writings describe attempts to recapture this moment of enlightened clarity, whether it be in public festivals, reverie, contemplation, faith, or love and friendship. Mediation tends to be a great obstacle to this goal, even if, as we have seen in previous chapters, there are occasions (particularly in the political writings but also in *Emile*) in which certain forms of mediation are given a positive charge.

Scripture

When Rousseau departed from Christian dogma, he did so, in his view, in service to what he called “the pure and simple religion of the Gospel.” Although Rousseau regarded almost all books as obstructions to the voice of nature, he made an exception for the Bible, calling it “the most sublime of all the books.” (CC, to Vernes, 25 mars 1758, 634, v:65)²⁹ The reader is compelled to wonder how Rousseau could have such disdain for books in general and such praise for one particular book. Why embrace this book and no others? Rousseau believed all books were flawed, including even the Bible (as is evident from the frequency with which it is misunderstood and misused), but the Bible is by far the best of them. Perhaps this was the furthest Rousseau could afford to go, politically, toward refusing intermediaries altogether. It would be better, from a Rousseauean perspective, to abjure intermediaries altogether and rely exclusively on the inner voice, but, had Rousseau questioned the sanctity of Scripture, it would have become difficult for him to continue to call himself a Christian and to fend off the charges leveled against him by the priests. Given the impracticality of eliminating all forms of mediation, Rousseau tried instead to marginalize its most pernicious manifestations and elevate the one that best facilitates communion with God and His order.

Rousseau’s theology originated where his whole philosophical system originated, in a pre-moral, pre-linguistic state of nature, characterized by innocence, and therefore, in Rousseau’s view, goodness. Scripture functions

as all words do—as compensation or “*supplement*” for an insufficiency created by the departure from nature. The Bible is a product of humanity’s division; it originated, Rousseau tells us in the second *Discourse*, only after human beings left the state of nature.³⁰ This is in keeping with the basic premise of that work—that no one had gone back far enough in time to understand human nature. Language was not necessary in the state of nature, becoming so only when a space emerged between our lived experience and our conscious relationship to that experience. As Joshua Mitchell puts it, for Rousseau, “words—the entire contents of *the Book* are a blasphemy against God.”³¹ If not a blasphemy, language is at least an impediment to the recovery of God’s voice. It is both a pit into which we fall and also the ladder we futilely reach for to climb out. In this case, though, we do have an alternative. This is not the case of the sick person of Rousseau’s *Preface to Narcissus* who, having been made weak by medicine, is in turn forced to depend on it for her recovery. (PN, ii:971; ii:196) Language and other mediators have alienated us from God, but we do not need to rely on language to return to Him. We always have the option to turn away from language altogether, toward the inner voice, through which God speaks to everyone.

As enamored of the Bible as Rousseau was, he distinguished it from the voice of God and admitted that there could be occasions upon which it might be necessary to transgress the Gospel in order to remain true to God: “Whatever deference I owe to the sacred text, I owe even more to its Author, and I would sooner believe the Bible falsified or unintelligible than God unjust or evil.” (NH, ii:684; vi:562) Though Rousseau frequently counseled his readers to consult the Bible, he made clear that it would be “better yet” to “leave all the books, return to yourself and listen to your inner voice that speaks to all hearts.”³² These would seem to be totally opposite paths to God and yet Rousseau suggests here that they are equally reliable. The path to God goes through Scripture but not only through Scripture. There is a totally unmediated path to God, available to those able to strip away the impediments to the sentiment of existence.

Miracles

How could Rousseau extol the virtues of a book that is so susceptible to the sectarianism he believed to be the great enemy of peace? Unless we want to question Rousseau’s sincerity, we are compelled to conclude that Rousseau was advocating a particular approach to the Bible, a particular hermeneutics. For example, immediately preceding an exaltation of the Scriptures, Rousseau conceded that he found in revelation objections he could not solve. Rousseau dedicated himself to the Bible, to be sure, but it was to the spirit of the Bible, not the letter, that Rousseau was loyal. It must be acknowledged, Rousseau wrote, that the Bible . . . is “full of unbelievable things, of things which are repugnant to reason and impossible for any sensible man to conceive or to accept.” (LB, iv:995; ix:74) Rousseau, for

example, opposed the invocation of miracles as evidence for the divinity of Scripture. If nature itself is superabundant with God's presence, why would God appeal to events that contradict the fundamental laws of His own creation? For Rousseau, the divinity of Scripture is a product of what it is, not how it came into being. Scripture was, for Rousseau, divine insofar (and only insofar) as it served as a path to the *religion naturelle*.

Rousseau regarded the doctrine of miracles as an assault on reason and on natural religion. "Religion," he wrote in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, "has no enemy more terrible than the defenders of superstition." (iii:695–6; ix:141) The doctrine of miracles precluded a reconciliation of reason and revelation by making it a religious duty to abandon one's reason. All that we need to know, we know by listening to the inner voice; miracles do not qualify under this standard. If a doctrine is to be believed, it must be accessible by all of the pathways to truth. So, core religious tenets must square with what our reason, sincerely applied, tells us as well and could tell us even without the Gospel.

Priests

While Rousseau was not a pantheist, he did believe that God exists *in* existence. God is isomorphic with nature, even if He also exists outside of it. We have no need of representatives to lead us to God, because we are always already close to Him, so long as we listen to our conscience. God cannot be represented by priests, just as sovereignty cannot be represented in Rousseau's political theory. The essence of the republican general will is damaged when mediated through representative institutions. Likewise, the authority of priests (along with the doctrine of miracles, and prayers requesting God's intervention) is incompatible with Rousseau's belief in God's immanence. God speaks through the natural order itself, not through priests, who have no special claim to understand God's wisdom, or through miracles, which are by definition departures from the natural order, or by answering requests for His intervention, which presuppose that He has not already granted enough. Prayer as adoration, by contrast, prayer as communion with the natural order, is a recognition and expansion of the love of existence, which Rousseau regarded as essential to human happiness.

Whether Rousseau called himself a Protestant or a Catholic, he was always loyal to the belief that the divine presence is felt immediately when it is experienced directly, without the mediation of doctrine or priests. Revelation makes itself known through a "*sentiment intérieur*." Even if born on a desert island, never having seen another human being, the vicar tells the young Rousseau that he could learn of God by making use of his God-given faculties, which require no intermediary. (E, iv:625; xiii:473) This is an early version of the self-sufficient *solitaire*, who appears frequently in Rousseau's *corpus* and eventually becomes a model for Rousseau himself in his old age.

Conscience

It is not scripture, prayer, or the clergy that enable access to God's wisdom but rather a *sentiment intérieur*, which Rousseau also refers to as "conscience." The Latin *con sciencia*, literally "with knowledge," captures the nature of Rousseauian truth—a general set of truths known to all by virtue of their basic humanity, accessed more by sentiment than reason. Rousseau calls conscience a "divine instinct," an infallible judge of good and evil that makes human beings similar to God. (*E*, iv:600–601; xiii:454; also, *ML*, iv:1111; xii:197). Conscience acts on the soul in the way that instinct acts on the body.³³ Rousseau specifically opposes conscience to reason, the former embodying an unmediated communion with God, the latter all too frequently mediated and detached from the voice of nature. Reason, the vicar says, too often "deceives us," while conscience "never deceives; it is man's true guide." (*E*, iv:595; xiii:449) Conscience is quite literally communal, a community of knowledge available to all those willing and able to hear God's voice. Conscience is knowledge *with* God, the faculty through which God speaks in us. Rousseau used the term "God" to describe the constellation of qualities outlined in the previous section ("Divinity"), while "conscience" described for Rousseau the pathway by which we commune with God.³⁴

Though it is an "innate" faculty, conscience is not active in the state of nature, because there is nothing to elicit its activity. Conscience might be described as semi-natural, because, although it is innate, it is activated only upon contact with other human beings. On the other hand, it does not need to be cultivated in society. It is an extension of *amour de soi* that manifests upon entry into society. It is, like reason, a capacity, part natural and part social. Conscience is self-love, extended through identification with God's order. When his study of God begins, Emile . . .

. . . finds his true interest in being good. . . . He does this not only for the love of order, to which each of us always prefers love of self, but for the love of the Author of his being—a love which is confounded with that same love of self—and, finally, for the enjoyment of that durable happiness which the repose of a good conscience and the contemplation of this Supreme Being promise him in the other life after he has spent this one well. (*E*, iv:636; xiii:482)

Rousseau's understanding of conscience was connected very closely to his theology. Communing with God, for Rousseau, meant consulting one's conscience, a process that can work only if we have been endowed by our Creator with an innate *sense* of right and wrong.

Conscience is our most reliable alternative to the sophisticated doctrines of those who would come between us and God. Rousseau has in mind priests, who along with doctors and philosophers, "make [us] unlearn how

to die." (*E* iv:270; xiii:182) Priests, doctors, and philosophers would ordinarily make strange bedfellows, but, in a Rousseauean scheme, the three affect the human soul analogously. Priests mediate our relationship with God, doctors mediate our relation with our bodies, and philosophers mediate our relationship with our thoughts; in various ways, they all insert themselves between us and ourselves, between us and the world, between us and God. If we listen to our conscience, Rousseau suggests, we will not be tempted by these preachers of mediation.

"*Que d'hommes entre Dieu et moi!*" (So many men between God and me!), the vicar laments in the *Profession*. (*E*, iv:610; xiii:462) To love God is to love his creation and immerse oneself in it; we worship God by loving nature and loving our fellow creatures.³⁵ This is a divine presence, the force of which elicits love more than obedience. Rousseau has St. Preux describe this love in speaking of Julie:

The love of God does not detach her from creatures; it gives her neither harshness nor bitterness. All these attachments, produced by the same cause, mutually stimulated become thereby more charming and sweet, and for my part I believe she would be less devout if she less tenderly loved her father, her husband, her children, her cousin, and myself. (*NH*, ii:590; v:483)

The vicar's religious quest was for "more immediate communications," to reduce the distance between himself and God and, at the same time, to reduce the distance between himself and his fellow human beings. He did this initially in order to avoid the temptations of *amour propre*, but, in so doing, he discovered the "elements of every religion." (*E*, iv:609; xiii:453)

Rousseau described conscience as a feeling—manifested as pleasure when we adhere to the moral order and pain when we depart from it. This has been read by some as an implicit attack on philosophy. And while Rousseau did consistently disparage almost all forms of philosophizing, he did not believe that the supremacy of sentiment over reason necessarily implied the victory of religion over philosophy, as, for example, Pierre-Maurice Masson thought.³⁶ Rousseau saw sentiment as the driving force behind both religion *and* philosophy, preferring neither, in and of themselves, while embracing both insofar as they steered clear of dogma and remained open to the heart. Reason without sentiment is empty; sentiment without reason is amorphous. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, the two must operate in concert, with reason formulating arguments and sentiment determining how we choose among them.

Ronald Grimsley, in his essay on Rousseau and religion, concludes that conscience cannot yield knowledge because "the acts of conscience are not judgments but sentiments." (*E*, iv:600; xiii:453) Grimsley's essay is an insightful rumination on Rousseau's religious thought, but this particular claim misses the mark.³⁷ Rousseau argued that our best *judgment* will result from

following the principles we *sense* to be right, and conscience is the faculty through which those sensations pass. In other words, Grimsley presupposes precisely what Rousseau meant to contest—that reason is the only path to knowledge. While reason is the faculty we use to articulate our judgments, conscience is the faculty we use to select them. It is easy to conflate the articulation of a judgment with the judgment itself. However, for Rousseau, there was far more to any judgment than its articulation, and he gave far less credence to the articulation of a judgment than he did to the sentiment that inspired its articulation and adoption. Rousseau elevated sentiment, feeling, and conscience, not to disparage reason *per se*, but to circumscribe it, to confine it to its proper function as the handmaid of sentiment.

However, even if religion is more felt than thought, accessed more by sentiment than reason, Rousseau maintained that there are no religious truths that conflict with reason. Some truths are beyond reason, some beyond sentiment, some beyond human perception altogether. Most religious principles are *more* accessible by sentiment than reason, but this in no way implies that they are at odds with reason, and there are some aspects of religion that are best accessed through reason. For example: “The greatest ideas of the Divinity come to us from reason alone.” (E, iv:607; xiii:459) Reason is insufficient as the animating faculty of sound moral judgment, but neither will any sound moral judgment conflict with what our faculties, including our reason, tell us.

This point of view has provoked many to characterize Rousseau as a deist. If Rousseau is to be considered a deist, his deism will have to be distinguished from that of his contemporaries. Deism was, for them, the result of a rational critique of Christianity that sought to render reason and Christianity consistent. Deists attempted this reconciliation by dropping components of Christian doctrine until only a rationally defensible core remained. Rousseau, by contrast, embraced deism, not as an extension of rationalism, but as an extension of sentiment. He vowed to embrace only those precepts he knew to be immediately true in his heart and discounted those precepts made available by the medium and mediation of scripture or priests. Rousseau came to deism through sentiment, not through reason.³⁸

iii. Simplicity

... once everything is shaken, one ought to preserve the trunk at the expense of the branches.

The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar (E, iv:607; xiii:477)

Foremost among the thoughts running through Rousseau’s mind during his great illumination on the road to Vincennes, was that the truths worth knowing—the truths that pertain to human happiness—would have to be simple. Upon seeing the question posed by the Dijon Academy, Rousseau

realized that the aversion he had always felt toward sophistication was about much more than his personal or provincial preferences. Sophistication, Rousseau realized, was partly responsible for the moral degeneration of European society. More than merely a symptom of moral corruption, sophistication was also a cause of it. Predictably, then, when Rousseau's thoughts turned toward religion, he emphasized "duty over dogma," "good works" over "articles of faith," and "acts of virtue" over "formulas of belief." (*LB*, iv:960; ix:47) Rousseau was interpreting or, perhaps, reinterpreting Christianity so as to make it another version of the "sublime science of simple souls."

Rousseau did not refer to himself as a Christian until it became necessary to defend himself against charges of heresy issued by the government of Geneva in response to the publication of *Emile*. At that point, Rousseau declared his fidelity to Christianity, but hastened to add that he understood his declaration to put him in the company of everyone "of good faith who reasons." (CC, to pasteur Frédéric-Guillaume de Montmollin, 24 August 1762, 2108, xii:246) Rousseau's Christianity was, therefore, liberal to say the least, though Rousseau insisted it was no less religious as a consequence. He derived his religious liberalism not from skepticism but from conviction—the conviction that God's goodness is expansive and can never be captured in commandments. It inheres in the relationship between God's Creation and our communion with it. Holiness is superabundant; Rousseau's faith is consequently modest, tolerant, and open to the perception of the divine.

Rousseau distinguished between the "ceremony of religion" and "religion itself." (*E*, iv:608; xiii:460) God wants only the worship of the heart; everything else is incidental, neither good nor bad in itself, becoming so based on social and political contingencies. The worship of the heart is "uniform," which means that particular sects are all reconcilable so long as they do not contradict the essential truths of natural religion. The form of external worship is purely a matter of convention; as Rousseau put it, God takes no "interest in the form of the priest's costume." (*E*, iv:608; xiii:460)

Fastidious readers will want to know how we are to distinguish between those principles that are essential and those that are merely ceremonial. That is a question that can never be definitively settled. However, Rousseau hoped believers of different sects would approach one another with this distinction in mind, and that, in this way, they would at least have a chance of finding common ground. Religious communion remains a possibility, Rousseau believed, because all existing religions are manifestations of a single, essential religion. Rousseau called this religion the *religion naturelle*, and believed that it contained "nothing . . . but the elements of every religion." (*E*, iv:609; xiii:460) If we had listened to our hearts, the various sects and denominations would never have emerged.

As soon as peoples took it into their heads to make God speak, each made Him speak in its own way and made Him say what it wanted. If one had listened only to what God says to the heart of man, there would never have been more than one religion on earth. (*E*, iv:608; xiii:460)

In the *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau imagined a religious *tabula rasa* akin to the state of nature he used to derive political principles. This religious tabula rasa, which will be used to derive principles of faith, presupposes assembly of the human race, in which individuals emerge from the wilderness of religious conflict and strife in order to “agree on a religion common to all peoples.” Rousseau imagined that these assembled individuals would begin “by proposing his own as the only true and reasonable and proven religion.” (*LB*, iv:975; ix:58) But since each sect’s proof would fail to persuade the others, they would soon become exhausted and seek out an alternate means of reaching agreement. After “much time lost in these puerile altercations, men of sense will seek means of conciliation.” (*LB*, iv:975; ix:58) To accomplish this, they will banish all theologians, having come to the understanding that each one of these sects is false insofar as it relies on coercion and fear. They will eventually settle on the one true religion, which contains only those simple truths known to all: charity, pity, love of one’s fellow human beings.

This is the “trunk” spoken of in the *Profession* and then again in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*: “. . . once everything is shaken, one ought to preserve the trunk at the expense of the branches.” (*E*, iv:607; xiii:477; *LM*, iii:802; ix:227) Rousseau associated this trunk with those principles available by reason as well as faith, and associated the branches with *amour propre*. In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau became very specific about what he considered to be the core religious principles: “serve God, love one’s neighbor, obey the law,” and, Rousseau added, “all good Religion” consists in this alone. (*LM*, iii:802; ix:227) His was a doctrine of practice as opposed to belief, an injunction to moral conduct as opposed to scriptural fidelity. “What is essential in Religion consists in practice,” Rousseau wrote to Beaumont. (*LB*, iv:962; ix:48) This is already highly ecumenical, but Rousseau went further, specifying that the “practice” he had in mind was very basic, even to the point that one ignorant of God’s teaching could receive salvation. One must only “be a good man, merciful, humane, and charitable.” (iv:962; ix:48) It is to severely underestimate his position to say that Rousseau put works above faith. He referred to “a thousand bizarre creeds prescribed by men and rejected by reason” and claimed further that he would be willing to face his judgment day without belief but having worked to do the good God wills. (*LV*, iv:1073; iii:119) Rousseau was certain, not just that one should follow one’s heart rather than ritual, but also that God wants us to reason in this way.

In its simplicity, Rousseau’s theology hearkened backward toward Jesus and the Bible, pushing aside all of the dogma and doctrine that had become associated with the purity of the faith. On the other hand, with respect to the history of ideas, Rousseau’s theology was forward-looking, pointing beyond the rationalism of the *philosophes* to the sentimentalism of the Romantics.

Rousseau’s simple faith—his faith in simplicity—put him and odds with his intellectual contemporaries. Having shown that reason gives us access

to all of the truths accessible through faith, the *philosophes* had either done away with God altogether or confined Him to the passive function of an *horloger* (watchmaker).³⁹ None had thought to credit God for the understanding of His order that they had gained through their own faculties. Far from passive, God speaks to us actively, intervening, moment to moment, giving us the opportunity to listen or to turn away. Every moment that we commune with truth is a moment of communion with God, a moment in which we have used our God-given faculties to engage the God-given order of things.

iv. Utility

As we saw in chapter three, Rousseau introduced many of his works with an appeal to their utility. The *Profession* was the “most useful writing of the century” because, in it, Rousseau believed, he had reconciled the demands of religion with the demands of politics. (*LB*, iv:960; ix:46–7)⁴⁰ In the text, the vicar maintains that the path to God is expansive and can only be personally navigated. He argues, in other words, that the nature of Divine wisdom necessitates a policy of religious toleration.

Insofar as is politically feasible, each person should be free to cultivate her own, personally functional relationship with the divine. There is one, and only one, justification for restricting what should otherwise be the “most perfect liberty.” (*LV*, iv:1072; iii:119) This occurs only when religious practices—principally intolerance—subvert the social order. Even if Rousseau was concerned primarily to prevent intolerant sects from threatening the ecumenism that he regarded as a precondition for civic unity, it is not difficult to imagine the ways in which Rousseau’s sanctioning of restrictions on religious liberty could be deployed toward other ends. Indeed, the occasion for Rousseau’s writings on religion was state-sponsored persecution of himself and others for their ostensibly heterodox religious beliefs. As the *Letters Written from the Country* and Rousseau’s response to them plainly demonstrate, the Genevan clergy was quite comfortable with the notion that religious liberty could be restricted as a means of enforcing religious conformity.⁴¹

For Voltaire and so many other Enlightenment thinkers, the obvious solution to this problem was the separation of church and state and the institution of practices of religious toleration. As might be expected, Rousseau’s response was slightly different. He supported religious liberty, and he insisted that political institutions be guided by civic rather than religious imperatives. However, while he could endorse the separation of church and state, he could not endorse the separation of *religion* and state because he believed that the state could not be indifferent to the views—religious and otherwise—of its citizens. For Rousseau, the problem posed by establishment Christianity was not only that its imperious assertions violated the sanctity of individual conscience; it was not only that it threatened secular authority over political institutions. Rousseau was also concerned about the

nature of the doctrine propounded by establishment Christianity—in particular, its intolerance of divergent viewpoints, but also its cosmopolitanism and its disparaging of earthly life. Rousseau, therefore, preserved a role for the state in encouraging religious beliefs and practices that were conducive to civil solidarity.

Rousseau was attacked by Christophe de Beaumont (in response to whom he wrote the *Letter to Beaumont*) and Jean-Robert Tronchin (in response to whom he wrote the *Letters Written from the Mountain*) and other arbiters of the faith on all of these grounds. They opposed his defense of individual conscience for the obvious reason that it subordinated the authority of the Church to individual conscience. They opposed his civil religion, as well, even though it authorized a role for religion in the functioning of a just society. This was because the religion that Rousseau defended was an explicitly *civic* faith, driven by temporal imperatives, which were to be articulated and maintained not by a class of priests but by the people and their deputies. Another way of putting this would be to say that Rousseau subordinated religious doctrine to his doctrine of utility. Religion, like everything else, was of value based on the extent to which it served the truths essential to human happiness, based on the extent to which it facilitated communion, whether that be a personal communion with God or social communion with one's fellow human beings.

Personal Utility

As we have seen, Rousseau was quite concerned to demonstrate that truths accessed through religion were available by other means as well. He was equally concerned, however, to emphasize the unique power of religion. For example, having outlined a reconciliation of religion and reason *via* the vicar, Rousseau went on to add, “From the point of view of principles, there is nothing that philosophy can do well that religion does not do still better, and religion does many things that philosophy could not do.” (E, iv:633; xiii:473) Rousseau was very serious about Emile’s religious education, which he regarded as indispensable: “The forgetting of all religion leads to the forgetting of the duties of man.” (iv:561; xiii:421) Elsewhere, Rousseau wrote that modern European morality, such as it was, had been Christian before it became philosophic. (LM, iii:727; ix:166)

Only two types of people disbelieve in God—the simple and the sophisticated. Simple people (the savage) do not believe in God because they do not *need* Him. (LF, iv:1137; viii:262) The savage lacks both faith and reason, because he has no need for either of them, content to allow instinct alone to be his guide. And because human beings are by nature good, the savage does not offend God in following instinct alone, even though he does not know God. The other type, the sophisticated one—the philosopher—disbelieves in God because he does not *want* to believe. He imagines himself to know enough on his own, without recourse to higher truths. This sophisticated

person becomes infatuated with complicated formulas and systems such that he “unsettles all the axioms of simple and primitive reason.” (*LF* iv:1137; viii:262) He, like everyone else, needs God, but his *amour propre* prevents him from understanding this truth. He persists in errors, reasoning in circles that may serve to increase his reputation but do not contribute anything useful to human happiness.

Rousseau’s own relationship to the divine was personal, as he believed any genuine relationship to God must be. From time to time, this made it difficult for him to defend himself in the face of philosophical and clerical attacks. Though frustrated by his inability to respond adequately to these attacks, Rousseau ultimately settled on a utilitarian defense. Rousseau decided he would believe because it is good to believe, good for everyone to believe, and good for him to believe in the way he believed.⁴² “I do not believe there is a man in the world who needs [religion] as much as me,” Rousseau wrote in the midst of his falling out with Diderot and the others. (CC, to Jacob Vernes, 18 February 1758, 616, v:32) Despair solidified Rousseau’s faith; it accentuated the solace he found in God. In particular, Rousseau’s faith in the immortality of the soul carried him through his most difficult times. “I have suffered too much in this life not to expect another.” (*LV* iv:1075; iii:121) The immortality of the soul is a good belief because it serves happiness. Happiness would be deficient without it, and, in Rousseau’s view, it was therefore reasonable to believe in it.

Judith Shklar described the “core of Rousseau’s own faith” as never having gone beyond “his sense of needing religion emotionally.”⁴³ She intended this as a diminution of Rousseau’s faith, but Rousseau regarded personal necessity as an important element in his ethics of truthseeking. It was an important check on *amour propre* and its tendency to pull us away from the truths essential to human happiness. Anything that confirmed for us the essential goodness of existence ought to be regarded for Rousseau as in some way true. In the *Letter to Franquières*, Rousseau was quite clear about the utilitarian, sentimental rationale for his freely determined belief in God. (*LF*, iv:1134–5; viii:260–1) In balancing the proofs of the existence of God, Rousseau’s religion was, in Masson’s words, “the mystical projection of the essential needs of his soul.” There is in this the presumption of a set of truths that stand apart from the Bible, apart even from God, even if Rousseau believed God to be our surest guide to these truths. These most basic of truths are the truths essential to human happiness, the “essential needs of the soul,” as Masson put it. It was God’s will that all human beings know and delight in these truths, and it was, correspondingly, this benevolence that imposed upon human beings the obligation of gratitude and the rationale for religious devotion.

Rousseau’s God is good, wishes for happiness, rewards those who are moral, and would never give an order contrary to reason—all that is necessary for human happiness and nothing more. This God serves human beings and exists to do so. The moment religion ceased to serve human happiness,

Rousseau regarded it as a betrayal of God, called it dogmatism, and refused to conform his will to it. He was uninterested in a religion to which he would have to accommodate himself. Rousseau's Christianity did not foreclose or command; it offered; it welcomed. He saw God's presence and wisdom as a gift, an invitation extended to those who are willing to participate in it. Rousseau's Christianity was not compensation for humanity's insufficiency; it was rather the most sublime realization of human potential. But happiness and morality remain possible even without knowledge of God. God does not demand submission; he issues no demands at all. Rather, he invites human beings to look into themselves and to join in moral communion with their fellow human beings.

A story Rousseau tells in the *Confessions* offers some insight into his attitude toward religion. In it, he tells of a day when he was in his twenties and was brooding over the question of his own salvation. Having read faithfully both Jansenist and Jesuit writings on the question, Rousseau found himself wondering whether he would be damned. His choice of words would indicate that his worry at being damned was stronger than his hope for salvation. The consequence was a state of anxiety that Rousseau playfully hoped might be alleviated by a single toss of a stone, with everything on the line. Strike the tree toward which he was aiming and he would be saved—miss it and be condemned. (C, i:243; v:203–4) In relaying the story, Rousseau initially builds suspense, reporting that his hand was “trembling” and his heart was throbbing. But quickly he changes his mind and reveals that there was really very little suspense involved because he had taken care to select a very large, very close tree. After that, Rousseau never doubted his salvation. Rousseau worshipped God because he knew happiness was possible only with God. Faith, Rousseau suggests in the story, should not make us anxious. The goodness of faith must be measured by its utility, its capacity to serve the “truths that pertain to human happiness.” Rousseau fixed his wager so as to ensure that his faith was made compatible with his happiness.

The vicar “believes in God,” Shkclar writes, “since it is reasonable and comfortable to do so.”⁴⁴ Rousseau himself believed because he needed God in order to “endure the miseries of [his] life.” (R, i:1019; viii:23) Rousseau’s skeptical instincts did not allow him to know much more; he did not have the confidence of the priests (or of philosophers). Rousseau believed that the world confronts us with much more than we can possibly grasp by reason alone. If we do not wish to be tossed back and forth eternally by the many philosophical attempts to pin down the infinite, then we can only take recourse in faith. Neither theism nor atheism can be established “by the lights of reason.” (LV, iv:1070; iii:117) Moreover, none of the objections to either one of these can be refuted, because both “take in some things of which men have no genuine idea at all.” (LV, iv:1070; iii:117) That being the case, Rousseau chose to believe for utilitarian reasons. It is consoling to believe; faith, unlike reason, does not waver, and doubt, Rousseau wrote, is “too violent a state for my soul.” (LV, iv:1070; iii:117) If we rely on reason

alone, we will always feel a void. Faith is an “*objet infini*,” the only thing that can fill that void and restore wholeness to one’s soul, compensate for the emptiness that persists even after we have filled our hearts and minds with everything accessible to us through reason. This is to justify faith as restitution for humanity’s limitations; it is to justify faith as conducive to human happiness. Priests may not find this kind of a defense sufficient, but, for Rousseau, a utilitarian defense was the only kind he would trust.

Political Utility

If faith is grounded in the realization that God’s wisdom is largely beyond our grasp, then, politically, toleration becomes the only defensible policy. Rousseau emphasized the limitations of his faith, because piety (and politics) demands it; anything more would be arrogance, as Rousseau made clear in his sarcastic concession to those who claim to know more in the imagined polity of the *Letters Written from the Mountain*: “We congratulate you wholeheartedly. Your reason may be superior to ours. . . . We consent to your knowing everything. Allow us to be ignorant of something.” (LM, iii:699; ix:143) Rousseau implicitly associated this doctrine with the established Church in Geneva and with Tronchin, the public prosecutor to whom he was responding in these letters. He contrasted Tronchin and the Genevan Church with an account of how a well-intentioned community of believers would constitute their principles of faith:

If our Proselytes are masters in the country in which they live, they will establish a form of worship as simple as their belief, and the Religion that will come of all that will be the most useful to men by its very simplicity. Freed from all they put in the place of virtues, and having neither superstitious rites nor subtleties in the doctrine, it will go entirely to its true goal, which is the practice of our duties. (LM, iii:700–1; ix:144)

This, Rousseau added, is the “true spirit of the Gospel. . . . In every Nation, the one who fears [God] and devotes himself to justice is pleasing to him.” (LM, iii:704; ix:147) Rousseau’s was, therefore, a Christianity aimed at maximum inclusivity. To love God is to love peace and to love peace is to be tolerant. As for toleration, it is a precondition for political unity. Rousseau preached tolerance for a diversity of religious beliefs not because he regarded diversity as intrinsically valuable. In fact, as we have seen in previous chapters, Rousseau was partial to that which is shared or common. Diversity is to be respected not as a good in itself but rather as a prerequisite to unity: “Let us unite in the love of our common master in the practice of the virtues he prescribes to us. That is what makes the true Christian.” (LM, iii:700; ix:144). The greatest of philosophers—Christ himself—interpreted revelation as a force for peace in which the old “*sanguinaire intolerance*”

can be replaced by *sagesse* and *douceur*. (*Fragment on God and Revelation*, OC, iv:1054) Toleration is a prerequisite to the political communion that animates the entire political project, even if, as we will see below, tolerance cannot be absolute.

Rousseau's rationale for tolerance as public policy was based not on a doctrine of inalienable rights, but rather on theology and political utility. The primacy of the individual's conscience is to be respected because, as a matter of theology, religious communion requires it, and because, as a matter of political utility, it is necessary for civil communion. Rousseau sanctioned restrictions on religious liberty only when an individual's religious practices (not beliefs) threatened the unity of the body politic. As many critics have pointed out, this exception, however circumscribed, has the potential to upset the entire regime of toleration, to act as a wedge through which all manner of coercion might be justified. Many readers have exploited this point in order to depict Rousseau as an enemy of personal liberty.⁴⁵ In so doing, they have attended insufficiently to Rousseau's insistence that an authentic communion can result only from the voluntary association of otherwise free agents.

For Rousseau, the religious question was less about how to reconcile personal liberty and civic unity than it was about the threat posed to both personal liberty and civic unity by traditional Christianity. His writings on religion were primarily an attempt to restore religious agency to individual believers, because he believed both that any authentic religious experience would be personal and that civic unity could be fostered only in a climate of religious toleration. It is a mistake to conceive of the tension between religion and politics as zero-sum—to presuppose, in other words, that the more religion predominates in a society, the more personal liberty will be undermined. Rousseau argued that religion was indispensable, not only for cultivating political unity, but also for cultivating the spirit of tolerance that he believed to be a prerequisite to political unity. Political unity is facilitated less by establishing a particular religious doctrine than it is by broadening principles of faith to include anyone “of good faith who reasons.”

Rousseau considered the *Profession* the best and most useful writing of the century because he believed that he had successfully reconciled the demands of religion with the demands of politics. He had rendered loyalty to God consistent with personal happiness and political solidarity. All three of these demands—to God, to oneself, and to one's compatriots—point toward the same goal (communion) and require the same disposition (an open heart). Rousseau believed he had distinguished “religion itself” from “the ceremony of religion” (E, iv:608; xiii:460) and thereby identified “what is truly essential to religion.” (LB, iv:997; ix:75) These simple, unmediated, universal principles could become the foundation for any civil religion.

At the political level, as at the level of individual conscience, utility must be the standard by which religion is evaluated.

As soon as men live in society, they must have a Religion that keeps them there. A people has never subsisted nor ever will subsist without Religion, and if it were not given one, it would make one itself or would soon be destroyed. In every state that can require its members to sacrifice their lives, anyone who does not believe in the afterlife is necessarily a coward or a madman. (GM, iii:336; iv:117)

Rousseau likely decided that this language risked justifying religious persecution, because he opted not to include it in the final draft of the *Social Contract*. Nevertheless, he preserved the notion that societies require a religion in order to flourish. With respect to the individual, Rousseau was interested in religion as a pathway to moral action and personal happiness. Politically, however, Rousseau was concerned only, as Christian Jacquet puts it, with “whether the different religions do or do not serve the interests of the state.”⁴⁶ Readers tend to regard this as a subordination or diminishing of religion, but that was not the case. Everything, Rousseau believed, is to be measured by the contribution it makes to human happiness. Nothing stands above the criteria of autonomy, immediacy, simplicity, and utility—religion included. We are to reject any piece of religious doctrine that cannot be verified independently by these standards. There is no basis for a Burkean defense of politics, which would subordinate political decisions to religious doctrine. There is, in other words, no basis for the Christian doctrine of divine authority passing from Adam, down through kings and queens, culminating in European monarchy. Society is the creation of human beings, nature the creation of God. Religion, while essential to politics, must be rendered consistent with the demands of politics. This was, for Rousseau, not a subordination of religion, but a realization of God’s will that human beings find happiness.⁴⁷

Readings of Rousseau’s religious thought tend to emphasize Christianity’s tendency to subvert the requirements of a republic of virtue. And while Rousseau was clearly concerned about the compatibility of Christianity and republicanism, it is also important to acknowledge those aspects of Christian piety that facilitate republican solidarity. For Rousseau, a relationship to the divine, understood as openness to the voice of God, was indispensable both to a spirit of toleration and to the constitution of a social bond, particularly when considered against the available skeptical or atheistic alternatives. Too often, in discussions of religion and politics, religion is considered against the fantasy of a *tabula rasa*, rather than against the likely alternatives. Rousseau’s theology was driven as much by the deficiencies of secular worldviews as it was by an affirmation of religious principles themselves. While Rousseau was critical of religion, he judged it superior to the available alternatives, with respect to both personal happiness and political toleration. In Rousseau’s view, atheists and philosophers had done as much to undermine tolerance as had their clerical adversaries.⁴⁸

In the *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau tried to create the space for a utilitarian discussion of religion by distinguishing between two questions: the question of the truth or falsity of a religious doctrine and the question of the good or evil the doctrine can do for the human race.⁴⁹ We cannot know which specific religious doctrine is most faithful to God or even whether God is concerned for the specifics of religious doctrine. What we can know is what is “useful to men.” (*LB*, iv:975; ix:59) Consequently, we should, Rousseau suggests to Beaumont, “take utility . . . as a rule, and then establish the doctrine that is most related to it.” (*LB*, iv:975; ix:59) As Rousseau made clear in the *Moral Letters*, there are limitations to what human beings, with our limited faculties, can ever understand.

By focusing on utility, “we can hope to come as close to the truth as is possible for men.” (*LB*, iv:975; ix:59) This was Rousseau’s humility, less submission than recognition of humanity’s limitations in the face of nature’s majesty. Rousseau was here suggesting to Beaumont, with not too much subtlety, that there are things Christians must not have the arrogance to claim to understand. But, as the argument of the letter progresses, Rousseau goes even further (perhaps risking arrogance himself), effectively equating utility with truth. The original distinction between the truth of religious claims and their utility collapses. Rousseau introduced the distinction originally so as to create an opening within which questions of utility could be discussed without becoming embroiled in questions about the truth status of religious doctrine. But Rousseau ultimately used the distinction to go further, to subsume truth to utility. Utility, Rousseau argued, must be reason’s guide to the truths made available to us by God, our heart, and our mind. It is one thing to say that calculation of human utility is the most we can do. It is something else to suggest that what we are capable of understanding is also what God expects of us. This runs precisely counter to the traditional Christian understanding of faith, which asks the faithful to accept certain principles as true even when we cannot know them to be true. So, while Rousseau began by opening religion to the temporal, he ended up subsuming it to the temporal. This is justifiable, Rousseau argued, because, “Religion can contribute to the glory of God only through the well-being of man, since the other term of the relation, which is God, is by its nature above everything. . . .” (*LB*, iv:969; ix:54)

III. The Civil Religion

In his writings on religion, Rousseau frequently emphasized the importance of freedom to piety. This passage from the *Profession* is representative:

I no longer sense that I am anything but the work and the instrument of the great Being who wants what is good, who does it, and who will do what is good for me through the conjunction of my will and His and through the good use of my liberty. (*E*, iv:603; xiii:455)⁵⁰

Rousseau's writings on religious freedom, like his writings on political freedom, fuse *volonté* (will) with its *bon usage* (good use). First and foremost, freedom requires voluntarism for Rousseau: it is willful. However, freedom is not only voluntarism; it is not the obliteration of all constraints. It is, rather, the freedom to make "good use" of one's faculties—a conception that refuses both the Christian interpretation of freedom as surrender to the "Holy Spirit" and the Hobbesian view of freedom as incompatible with constraint.⁵¹ Religious freedom is analogous to "moral freedom," as Rousseau defined it in the *Social Contract*: "obedience to the law one has prescribed for oneself." (iii:365; iv:142)⁵² It requires an autonomous will that constrains itself based on principles derived from inner sentiment rather than external doctrines or mores.

If religion is to contribute to the "well-being of man" in politics, it must be both particular and general, without becoming coercive. Readers have been justifiably skeptical about the viability of this formula. For example, Touchefeu argues that when Rousseau invoked republican ideals, he discarded both the dogmatic religion of the priests and the religion of man, the former because it is too general, the latter because it is apolitical, useful only for *solitaires*.⁵³ Having approached Rousseau's writings on religion through the lens of communion, we are in a position to reconsider this question.

Rousseau's civil religion sits between the generality embodied in Christianity and the particularity embodied in the ancient religions of Sparta and Rome. It combines the tenets of the natural religion (which are universal) with the additional (particularizing) command that the civil laws be obeyed. Christianity, as practiced in Europe, posed problems, in Rousseau's view, with respect not only to generality but to particularity as well. Christianity risks sectarianism (excessive particularity), on the one hand, and cosmopolitanism (excessive generality) on the other. Both of these problems can be remedied by a civil religion that incorporates the vicar's universal principles and the ancients' reverence for the *patrie*, each of which is a manifestation of the desire for communion.⁵⁴

Rousseau's critique of Christianity was perhaps harshest with respect to its effect on the civic virtue of believers—its excessive generality. The Geneva draft of the *Social Contract* speaks of a will of humanity that would be compatible with Christian universality. But Rousseau omitted this idea from the final version, having decided that politics requires an altogether different path to communion—a combination of the particular and the general that he could not reconcile with Christianity, at least not with the Christianity of the priests. One of the essential principles of political life for Rousseau was that political associates will only be citizens if they feel a particular attachment to the *patrie*. A Christian society could not be a successful republic, in Rousseau's view, unless civic imperatives tempered Christianity's universality and otherworldliness.

In this respect, Rousseau was in agreement with the Genevan patriciate, which was concerned that civil obligations might be subverted by Christian

loyalties. The patriciate's approach to this problem was to emphasize the centrality of submission as a fundamental Christian duty, on the theory that this would facilitate civil obedience.⁵⁵ For Rousseau, this was insufficient, because he believed that free societies depend on active participation, as opposed to passive obedience. A submissive disposition could never produce the engaged communion that Rousseau regarded as a prerequisite to political success. Rousseau consequently borrowed from the patriciate's reading of Christian doctrine but gave it an altogether different moral charge. He adopted the patriciate's purported goal of civil solidarity and endorsed its view that the state must take an interest in the religious beliefs of its citizens. However, whereas the patriciate insisted that Genevan citizens adapt to the dictates of the Church, for Rousseau, it was Christianity that would have to be adapted to the needs of the citizenry. To achieve the proper balance of particular and general, Christianity would have to be reinterpreted in a way consistent with the requirements of politics. Rousseau, it must be remembered, committed himself to evaluating religion as he evaluated everything else—by the only standard available to human beings, utility. The patriciate was doing the same, Rousseau maintained, but was considering only its own utility, while Rousseau's concern was for the people as a whole.

The vehemence of Rousseau's attack on Christianity in the *Social Contract* stands alone in his writings, in the course of which Rousseau generally refrains from attacks on Christianity and even refers to himself as a Christian. The explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the fact that the *Social Contract* was the most directly political of Rousseau's major works. Rousseau always evaluated Christianity on the basis of its utility but not always its *political* utility. In the *Social Contract*, it was political utility that concerned Rousseau. Helena Rosenblatt suggests that Rousseau meant to be deliberatively provocative, urging his fellow Genevans to render their Christian faith consistent with political exigencies.⁵⁶ Rousseau had to convince his audience both that religion was necessary to politics and that Christianity, as conventionally practiced, would be a bad establishment.⁵⁷ Forced to choose between a general attack on Christianity and a specific attack on the Calvinist establishment, Rousseau opted for the former. He used a general attack on Christianity to provoke a specific response to established churches.

Any civil religion in Geneva's foreseeable future would have to be grounded in some revised version of Christianity. (There was no question of a revival of the cult of Sparta or Rome.) Rousseau was not entirely clear about what ought to be done with Christianity, but he knew that *something* would have to be done with it. Its reinterpretation was a prerequisite to a revival of republicanism. At times, Rousseau urged that Christianity be separated (*écarté*) from civil society, because it is too general and, therefore, subverts attempts at constituting a strong civic identity. At other times, he worried about the sectarianism that results when Christianity is yoked to the ambitions of priests.

Properly understood, Rousseau believed that Christianity could escape sectarianism and become a version of the *religion naturelle*. But, even if Christianity could be faithfully practiced as an incarnation of the natural religion, this would solve only the problem of excessive particularity. It does nothing for Christianity's excessive generality. Therefore, Rousseau's civil religion adds one principle to the *religion naturelle*: "the sanctity of the social contract and the laws." (SC, iii:468; iv:223) Can belief in the sanctity of human-made law be rendered compatible with Christianity? In the *Letter to Franquières*, Rousseau suggests that this may not be possible: Jesus could not produce a civil religion because he was destined for another mission. (LF, iv:1146; viii:269) However, if Christianity at its essence is the *religion naturelle*, as Rousseau clearly believed, then it ought to be possible to accommodate Jesus's teaching to the demands of republicanism, providing that nothing in the civil law conflicts with the essential tenets of the *religion naturelle*.

For this synthesis to succeed, religion must be reduced to core principles, so as to be maximally inclusive of religious diversity, and the state must intervene only on those occasions when religious doctrine acts to obstruct communion. Any religion that subverts the "foundations of society" must be discouraged, Rousseau wrote in the *Letter to Voltaire*. (iv:1073; iii:119) This initially sounds like a justification for religious persecution, but in practice Rousseau specified that he understood it to proscribe only intolerance and subversion of the laws.

I would therefore wish that in every State one might have a moral code, or a sort of civil profession of faith, which contained positively the social maxims that everyone would be bound to admit, and negatively the fanatical maxims that one would be bound to reject, not as impious, but as seditious. (LV, iv:1073; iii:120)

Rousseau tried to divide religion in two, distinguishing between the personal and civil dimensions of religious faith. The former Rousseau considered futile, even harmful to debate. "Let us judge actions of men and leave it to God to judge of their faith." (LDA v:13; x:260) The latter Rousseau considered subject to discussion, even crucial to consider. The state must neither establish a particular religion nor interfere in citizens' free exercise of it, except on those occasions when a particular sect actively subverts the civil laws.⁵⁸

Ghislain Waterlot argues that no existing religion could be rendered consistent with the civil religion.⁵⁹ But I think Rousseau meant to argue just the opposite—that all true religions *are* compatible with the civil religion, so long as they're properly interpreted, so long as "*la morale*" is emphasized and not "*le dogme*." The true Christian follows the *religion naturelle*. That is the message of the Bible, as Rousseau read it.

Waterlot picks up on what appears to be a contradiction between the *Social Contract*, in which Rousseau says that Christianity is unsuitable as

the civil religion and Letter II of the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, in which Rousseau imagines proselytes who adopt something like Christianity. This putative contradiction is mitigated when it is considered within the context of Rousseau's distinction between the religion of man and the religion of the priests. Rousseau associated Christianity's harmful doctrines with the influence of clerics, who were more concerned about their own power than the welfare of those they were ostensibly instructing. It was the religion of the priests that Rousseau associated with the civically dangerous doctrines of cosmopolitanism and the diminishment of earthly life. The priests introduce new doctrines, such that real patriots can no longer accept their authority. Jesus's actual teaching, by contrast, was open and expansive, such that it enables love of God to be fused with love of the *patrie*. True Christianity will not demand a place in a civil constitution. The Christianity of the priests, by contrast, insists on composing the civil constitution while simultaneously directing citizens' energies away from civil life.

Rousseau's civil religion will not be without some measure of coercion.⁶⁰ However, in the interest of communion, that coercion must be kept to a minimum. The sovereign must not, for example, condemn minority sects, as long as they conform to the basic principles of what Rousseau called the "essential Religion."

Every legitimate form of worship . . . in which the essential Religion is found . . . has never caused either revolts or civil wars, except when it was necessary to defend oneself and repulse persecutors. (*LB*, iv:978; ix:61)

Rousseau made clear that he meant to suggest by all of this that the "exercise of the Protestant religion is . . . legitimate in France." (*LB*, iv:979; ix:61)⁶¹ So, while some measure of political conformity must be enforced in a republic of virtue, Rousseau was quite clear that unity will be secured much more efficiently through the accommodation of differences than through their suppression.

Rousseau did not expect or even wish that the state stay out of religious affairs completely, but he did insist that it take no position on what he calls "error" and confine itself to those dimensions of religion that deal with "... morality, that is to say justice, the public good, obedience to the natural and positive Laws, the social virtues and all the duties of man and Citizen." (*LM*, iii:694–5; ix:140)⁶² This remains vague, though Rousseau specifies it a bit by invoking unity as a guiding value in counseling governments to "banish every harmful sentiment that tends to cut the social knot." (*LM*, iii:694–5; ix:140) And, in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau asked that he be judged by these standards as well.⁶³ He requested that he be condemned not for attacking Christian doctrine (which he admitted to doing) but only if he had failed to "prove" the doctrine he attacked "to be harmful to men either in itself or in its inevitable effects." (*LM*, iii:695; ix:140) In order to reconcile his political theory with his religious thought,

and to adequately answer the charges made against him, Rousseau needed to legitimize criticism of religious doctrine without delegitimizing religion as a whole. He needed to convince his accusers that his attack on religious doctrine was intended to salvage religion, not to destroy it.⁶⁴ It was necessary, in other words, for Rousseau to distinguish himself from the philosophers who attacked religious doctrine as part of a larger attack on religion itself. These philosophers had hacked away not only at the branches of the tree of religion, but at the trunk as well. Rousseau believed that the trunk must be saved from these skeptical philosophers, but that it could not be saved by the invocation of religious doctrine: "Religion has no enemy more terrible than the defenders of superstition." (*LM*, iii:695–6; ix:141) Only an open, expansive, inclusive reading of Scripture could "save the trunk."

The worst thing that religion can do, Rousseau argued, is to divide people from one another: "Above all, let us not behave like M. Joli de Fleuri, who, to establish his Jansenism, wants to uproot all natural law and all obligation that binds humans to one another." (*LB*, iv:969; ix:54)⁶⁵ Like everything else, Rousseau judged religion by its capacity to bring people together, to facilitate a *communion des coeurs*. He had two visions for Christianity—one wholly apolitical, without any possibility of entering the public discourse, the other wholly political, in which priestly authority is dissolved for the sake of the city and its liberty. Both of these views of religion facilitate political communion, the former because it can be left out of politics entirely, the latter because it makes patriotism a religious duty. With respect to Christianity, a magistrate has two options:

The first is to establish a purely civil religion, which includes all fundamental dogmas of every good religion, all dogmas truly useful to either a universal or a particular society, and leaves out all the others, which may be important to faith but not at all to worldly well-being, the unique object of legislation. . . . The other expedient is to leave Christianity as it is in its genuine spirit: free, disengaged from all bonds of flesh, with no other obligation than that of conscience, no other constraint in its dogmas than morals and Laws." (*LM*, iii:705–6; ix:148)

Both of these exclude the establishment of any particular religious doctrine. Religion should be exclusively a matter of "conscience," except where it cannot be reconciled with the republican requirement of civic unity, but, even there, this passage makes clear that any reasonable adaptation of Christianity will incorporate its ideals into a universal, non-doctrinaire, non-sectarian deism. Which path should the ruler follow? Rousseau does not say but suggests that both could be done simultaneously. Rousseau's ideal is not authoritarian or exclusionary: "I would bring them all to love one another without distinction and to regard one another as brothers, to respect all religions, and to live in peace, with each observing his own." (*E*, iv:629; xiii:477).

As much as possible, Rousseau tried to separate Christianity and politics. His argument was not that the state had no authority over religious practice. Rather, he insisted that political authority intervene to suppress religions that persecute or marginalize and to enforce conformity to the laws. But he defined Christianity in a way that made it independent of politics—"a totally spiritual religion, uniquely concerned with Heavenly matters." (SC, iii:466; iv:220) So religion was defined such that there would be little need to regulate it. The state's responsibilities are likewise defined so as to minimize its intervention in religious affairs.

Rousseau argues for a version of what we now refer to as the separation of church and state—against making "Christianity into a national Religion, . . . a part of the system of legislation" and against the "entry of religion into the political system." (LM, iii:704; ix:147) Christianity is a "universal social institution." It is not political. The best civil religion will include the core principles of Christianity but will be broader than Christianity, Rousseau writes in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, encompassing "all fundamental dogmas of every good religion." And this civil religion will be the basis for public policy, which *should* be "exclusive," taking advantage of the ecumenical canvas of the *religion naturelle* to carve out a strong social bond. Exclusivity at the national level is the condition for unity within the political body. And so while Rousseau did endorse the separation of *church* and state, he was not at all a proponent of separating *religion* from the state when it comes to inspiring patriotism, even if he was when it came to the "science of salvation." (LM, iii:706; ix:149) Neutrality with respect to the "science of salvation" facilitates the cultivation of a robust, exclusive political identity. Political authority is fused with religious authority in this scheme but only with respect to the most basic of religious principles. The religious tenets that the state may legitimately enforce turn out to be the same tenets present in any just system of laws. So, Rousseau's position includes both a formal commitment to the standard liberal approach to religion and a substantive commitment to the sacralization of justice.

The "gap" or "fissure" with which we began this chapter might now be reconsidered. While there is undoubtedly a tension between Rousseau's theology and his political theory, our discussion suggests that this tension is more nuanced than Rousseau's critics have argued. As we have already seen, there is an intimate connection between what Touchefeu refers to as the "particular religion of the city" and the "universal religion of the Gospel"—so much so that the latter can be justifiably described as a precondition of the former. While not sufficient for it, an ecumenical reading of Scripture, was, in Rousseau's view, necessary for civic unity. Rather than erode respect for individual conscience, Rousseau believed that his proposed civic faith would strengthen it. This is because, as we have seen, Rousseau's insistence on tolerance as a requirement of the civil religion was not simply pragmatic; it was a principled obligation of all believers.

Rousseau's civil religion was not an unreconstructed revival of the ancient "particular religion of the city" but, rather, an attempt to synthesize the particularity of antiquity and the universality of Christianity. Rousseau's strategy incorporated both generality and particularity, by assigning each to a different sphere: generality to matters of religious doctrine and particularity with respect to the "sanctity of the social contract and the laws." (SC, iii:468; iv:223) This accommodation is necessary because the sanctification of the laws is possible only in a context of respect for the sanctity of individual conscience in spiritual matters. Civil religion must therefore practice generality with respect to theology, so that it can achieve particularity with respect to a civic identity.

This suggests a reconciliation of the demands of politics with the demands of faith, which Rousseau believed he had achieved in the *Profession* and in Book IV of the *Social Contract*. In Rousseau's view, the vicar's distillation of the fundamental principles of faith both captured the essence of Christianity and provided a foundation upon which any civil religion may build. By de-emphasizing religious doctrine and emphasizing personal piety, Rousseau argued that societies could tame the inclination toward religious persecution *and* energize believers with respect to the virtue most essential to republican politics: love of one's fellow citizens. Religion, as Rousseau describes it, encourages tolerance and an openness to mystery, as well as extending an invitation to "love one another without distinction." (E, iv:629; xiii:477) It constitutes a dramatic improvement over the secular alternatives, with respect not only to civic unity, but to personal liberty as well.

This reading of Rousseau's writings on religion mitigates the tension between the personal theology of the *Profession* and the civil religion of the *Social Contract*, but it should be noted that it does not eliminate it. As stated above, an ecumenical reading of Scripture, while necessary to civic unity, is not sufficient. It may even be the case that, having emphasized the generality of God's will, societies will find it difficult to unite citizens around a particularized civic faith. Our reading of Rousseau's reconstructed Christianity does not, therefore, eliminate the tension between Rousseau's religious and political thought. However, it does reframe that tension. It allows us to move away from a zero-sum conversation, in which the particularity of civil religion obviates the ostensible commitment to personal liberty in the bulk of Rousseau's writings on religion, to a more nuanced discussion of how or whether a policy of religious toleration might be fused with the sanctification of the social contract and the laws. Rousseau's criticism and reconstruction of Christianity was an attempt to define the "true Christian" as one who subordinates all matters of doctrine to the imperative to "unite in the love of our common master." In Rousseau's civil religion, there is only one proscription: intolerance. (SC, iii:468–9; iv:223) As we have seen here, this was more than a piece of political pragmatism; it was also a reflection of Rousseau's deepest convictions about the nature of Divine wisdom.

Religion was for Rousseau both a great threat to the republic of virtue and its most important prerequisite. This is the kind of tension that runs throughout Rousseau's work, provoking frustration and fascination among his readers. It is to be expected that most readers would emphasize this tension when reading Rousseau's various writings on religion. However, it is also worth following Rousseau down the path toward reconciliation that he believed he had outlined. Having traced the contours of the religious pathway to truth in Rousseau's writings, we are able as well to appreciate the symmetries between religion and Rousseau's other preferred pathways to truth. In practice, there will always be challenges involved in integrating universal religious ideals into a particular political context. However, it remains the case that both religion and politics aim at the goal of a *communion des coeurs*, and that the contours of these pathways to communion are far more similar than different.

After having accomplished in the *Profession* what he regarded as a reconciliation of "Christianity with the requirements of political life," one can imagine Rousseau's dismay at the reception of that work. Rousseau's *Profession du vicaire Savoyard* was regarded as subversive, but its intent was precisely the opposite: to demonstrate that there is no necessary tension between the good of the *patrie* and fidelity to God. Both religion and civic virtue point toward communion, the former with God, the latter with one's compatriots. In this chapter, I have tried to show how these two forms of communion are more similar than different. I have tried to demonstrate that Rousseau's religious thought was inspired by a desire to interpret love of God such that it could be rendered consistent with love of the *patrie*.

Rousseau regarded faith in God as necessary both for the happiness of the individual and for the flourishing of republican virtue. Religion was part of all of Rousseau's major works—*Emile*, the *Social Contract*, the *Reveries*, the *Confessions*, and *Julie*. He subscribed to an extreme ecumenism, so extreme that we might wonder whether Rousseau's reinterpretation of Christianity turned it into something else. Rousseau admired the political function religion could fill but disdained the Church's vision of itself as the repository of divine revelation. He tried to "teach philosophers that one can believe in God without being a hypocrite and to teach believers that one can be a nonbeliever without being a rascal." (CC, to Vernes, 24 June 1761, 1782, x:260–261) This can be true only if there is something *else* underlying morality that gives force to both reason and faith. This something else, the joy of communion, is what allowed Rousseau to take *both* sides of a debate that seemed to everyone else to be zero-sum. Rousseau's reconciliation of the demands of faith with the demands of politics was achieved through an ecumenism, by which religion became the spiritual path to the same truths of human happiness available through reverie, republicanism, and, as we will see in the next chapter, reason.

Notes

- 1 Most of the literature on Rousseau's religious thought is in French. There are two comprehensive treatments of Rousseau's religious thought: Pierre-Maurice Masson, *La religion de J.-J. Rousseau*, 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1961); and Yves Toucheuf, *L'antiquité et le Christianisme dans la pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1999). Other important contributions have been made by Henri Gouhier, *Les Méditations Métaphysiques de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*; Pierre Burgelin, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la religion de Genève*; André Ravier, "Le dieu de Rousseau et le Christianisme," *Archives de Philosophie* 41 (1978) 353–434; and Robert Derathé, in both *Le rationalisme de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), chap. 4, and "Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le Christianisme," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 53 (1948) 379–414. Ronald Grimsley stands alone among Anglophone writers with respect to his interest in Rousseau's religious thought. In addition to an edited volume of Rousseau's writings on religion, *Religious Writings of Rousseau* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), he wrote a monograph on Rousseau's religious writings, *Rousseau and the Religious Quest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968). Judith Shklar, Timothy O'Hagan, and Arthur Melzer have also approached Rousseau from a primarily theological perspective, though in much less detail: Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 113–25; O'Hagan, *Rousseau* (London: Routledge, 1999), chaps. 11, 12; Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment," 344–60. Also noteworthy are Patrick Riley's *The General Will before Rousseau* (Princeton University Press, 1986), which explores the theological origins of Rousseau's central political concept, and Ourida Mostefai and John T. Scott eds., *Rousseau and L'Infâme: Religion, Toleration, and Fanaticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009).
- 2 Rousseau characterized his theology as "theism or natural religion," which Christians tend to "confound with atheism." (*E*, iv:606; xiii:451). As to those charges of heresy leveled by the priests, Rousseau responded by exalting Christianity as a "better explanation" of his *religion naturelle*. (CC, to Daniel de Pury, 30 December 1762, 2411, xiv:234). However, as Robert Derathé has documented, many of Rousseau's contemporaries felt that his worldview placed too much value on this life and not enough on the next for it to qualify as Christian. "Rousseau et le Christianisme," 406, 408. André Ravier puts it this way: "In this religion without revelation and without grace, in this Gospel without mysteries and without miracles, in this Christ without incarnation or redemption, could one recognize 'the doctrine of the Gospel?'" "Le Dieu de Rousseau," 434.
- 3 I use the terms "particularity" and "generality" in this chapter in a sense that may appear to be at odds with the most fundamental principle of Rousseau's political theory—that the "general will" is the basis for political legitimacy. It is important to note that Rousseau's general will has an element of exclusivity to it. It is general with respect to citizens' shared interests but particular with respect to foreigners. As Patrick Riley has put it, "The *générale* must be (somewhat) *particulière*." Riley, "Rousseau, Fénelon, and the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 90. The supremacy of the general will depends upon an element of particularity with respect to the sanctification of the civil laws. My argument is that this element of particularity cannot be rendered consistent with the requirement of freedom unless there is a concomitant commitment to generality with respect to theological questions.
- 4 Ronald Beiner's claim that "Christianity is not an option for the civil religion" is overly dismissive. "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," *The Review of Politics* 55:4 (Autumn 1993) 617. Beiner's claim is based on a reading

of the *Social Contract*. Elsewhere Rousseau struggled to reconcile Christianity with republican principles, a revision which he understood could not be avoided if republican principles were to flourish in Christian Europe.

- 5 Toucheuf, *L'Antiquité et le christianisme dans la pensée de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*; and Masson, *La Religion de J.J. Rousseau*.
- 6 Toucheuf, *L'Antiquité et le christianisme*, 3. See also Masson, *La Religion de J.-J. Rousseau*, vol. II, 204.
- 7 Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 222, 223.
- 8 Rousseau seemed to believe, for example, that the character of an author was the key to the quality of her arguments. Of all the truths Rousseau tried to communicate, none were more important to him than the truth of his own goodness. Good arguments come only from good souls; nothing good can follow from a corrupt soul and so, if Rousseau was to be believed on anything else, he felt that he must first be believed about this. This is the impulse that moved him to write the *Dialogues*, the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, the *Reveries*, the *Confessions*, and the *Letter to Beaumont*, in which Rousseau stated that he could have remained silent if the Archbishop of Paris had attacked only his book. But Rousseau believed that Beaumont had attacked him, and that he could not abide without a response. (*LB*, iv:927; ix:21)
- 9 As Patrick Riley has shown, Rousseau's central political concept—the general will—is a secular incarnation of a previously religious concept. *The General Will before Rousseau*, 19.
- 10 Rousseau speaks analogously in the *Reveries*: “I feel ecstasies and inexpressible raptures in blending, so to speak, into the system of beings and in making myself one with the whole of nature.” (*R*, i:1065–6; viii:61)
- 11 In Rousseau's novel, Julie bemoans Wolmar's atheism for a variety of reasons, but Rousseau seems particularly concerned to emphasize that it creates a “sad division between those to whom everything ought to be common.” (*NH*, ii:592; vi:484)
- 12 These passages call into question Jean Starobinski's emphasis on self-sufficiency as the endpoint of Rousseau's religious thought. Starobinski highlights passages in which Rousseau signals a concern for the judgment of God, as evidence of Rousseau's failure in his quest for self-sufficiency. (*Transparency and Obstruction*, 251). To live without dependence on “the discretion of other men” was always a goal for Rousseau. But self-sufficiency of the kind Starobinski describes—dependence from anything external—was not Rousseau's ambition. Every form of happiness he described involved dependence, whether it be on God, nature, friends or compatriots. Even in the *Reveries*, it is only when Rousseau transcends his solitude and becomes a part of something larger that he becomes content.
- 13 Toucheuf, *L'antiquité et le Christianisme*, 249.
- 14 See Toucheuf, *L'antiquité et le Christianisme*, 348–9.
- 15 “True Christians,” Rousseau wrote in this text, “are made to be slaves. They know it and are scarcely moved thereby; this brief life is of too little worth in their view.” (*SC*, iii:466–7; iv:221) Though elsewhere Rousseau admired the Christian's *douceur*, in the *Social Contract*, he described it as incompatible with the virtues of republican citizenship. (*SC*, iii:466; iv:220–1)
- 16 There is substantial disagreement over how much of the *Profession* is a reflection of Rousseau's own views. In the *Moral Letters*, for example, the tone of Rousseau's discussion of the possibility of knowledge is decidedly more skeptical. The *Profession* also displays more Augustinian pessimism about our earthly existence than does Rousseau. That said, the fact that Rousseau called the *Profession* the “most useful” work of the era suggests that it is at least partly, if not entirely

consistent with his own views. Though disparities can be identified, the fundamental claims of the *Profession* can be said to be consistent with Rousseau's own view—his critique of materialism and of philosophical systems, his emphasis of feeling over reason and on autonomy, simplicity, immediacy, and utility. In a letter to Moulton written at the end of 1761, Rousseau suggests that the vicar's views represent his to a substantial degree: "... you will easily conceive that the profession of faith of the Savoyard Vicar is mine. I desire too much that there be a God not to believe it." (CC, 23 December 1761, 1602, ix:342)

- 17 Whereas the traditional Christian narrative points toward the afterlife as the only path to redemption, Rousseau believed redemption was available in this life, provided we turn away from the empire of opinion and *amour propre* and return to the simple pleasures of communion. Rousseau's piety is premised on the view that this life is good, that we must rejoice in our presence in it and be grateful to God for it.
- 18 The vicar was more Augustinian than Rousseau: "Constantly caught up in the combat between my natural sentiments, which spoke for the common interest, and my reason, which related everything to me, I would have drifted all my life in this continual alternation—doing the bad, loving the good, always in contradiction with myself—if new lights had not illuminated my heart, and if the truth, which settled my opinions, had not also made my conduct certain and put me in agreement with myself." (E, iv:602; xiii:455)
- 19 As Rousseau wrote in the second *Discourse*, "most of our ills are our own work." (iii:138; iii:23)
- 20 This passage comes from the first draft of *Emile*, usually called the Favre manuscript.
- 21 Marilynne Robinson, "Hallowed Be Your Name," *Harper's*, July 2006, 25.
- 22 The theologian John Shelby Spong describes what he calls "true religion" as a force that embraces the life's uncertainties rather than a doctrine that purports to resolve them: "Security is so seductive and insecurity is so frightening. But security is always false, and insecurity is always real. No religion can make anyone secure, though it . . . can give the illusion of security. True religion enables one to grasp life with its radical insecurity and to live it with courage." *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying and How a New Faith Is Being Born* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001) 68.
- 23 Rousseau suspected the priests of subverting religion to *amour propre*—to the desire for power and for persecution, in an attempt to cultivate unity through exclusion. Christianity, Rousseau wrote in the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, "has nothing exclusive in it." It is a "universal religion." (iii:704; ix:147)
- 24 The exception, subversion of the civil order, is discussed in section III.
- 25 Rousseau's works are not without reference to an active intervening God. At the end of second walk of the *Reveries*, he invokes a God who seems to actively will his persecution. Likewise, in his "History of the Manuscript," appended to the *Dialogues*, he described what he took to be divine intervention to prevent the distribution of his manuscript. However, in the *Letter to Voltaire*, Rousseau rejected the idea of a God who intervenes on behalf of (or against) particular individuals. (LV, iv:1068–9; iii:116). With rare exceptions, Rousseau emphasized God's divine presence over his specific interventions: The argument of the *Letter to Voltaire* is representative: "It is to be believed that particular events are nothing here below in the eyes of the Master of the universe, that his Providence is only universal. . . ." (LV, iv:1069; iii:116)
- 26 See, for example, Judith Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, xiii.
- 27 In the *Letter to Voltaire*, Rousseau wrote: ". . . I am indignant that the faith of everyone is not in the most perfect liberty, and that man dares control the

- interior of consciences where he is unable to penetrate. . . ." (iv:1072; iii:119). This antipathy toward religious dogmatism mirrors Rousseau's antipathy toward what he regarded as the philosophical dogmatism that had emerged in its place.
- 28 Rousseau himself called it an "inspiration" in a letter to Malesherbes. (CC, 12 Jan 1762, 1804, x:301)
- 29 In his *Observations* on a reply made to his first *Discourse* by King Stanislaus of Poland, Rousseau described the Bible as a "divine Book, the only one necessary for a Christian, and the most useful of all even for someone who is not, to bring to the soul love for its Author and the will to carry out his precepts. Virtue has never spoken such a sweet language." (O, iii:48–49; ii:47)
- 30 ". . . it is evident, from reading the Holy Scriptures that the first Man, having received some lights and Precepts directly from God, was not himself in that state." (DI, iii:132; iii:19)
- 31 Joshua Mitchell, *Not by Reason Alone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 119.
- 32 Streckeisen-Moultou, *Oeuvres et correspondance inédites*, 133.
- 33 "The appetite of the senses conduces to the well-being of the body, and the love of order to that of the soul. The latter love, developed and made active, bears the name of conscience." (LB, iii:936; ix:28)
- 34 Conscience exists "in the depths of souls;" it is "an innate principle of justice and virtue." (E, iv:598; xiii:451)
- 35 "God . . . reveals himself to enlightened people in the spectacle of nature; that when our eyes are open, we must shut them in order not to see him there." (LB iv:952; ix:41)
- 36 Masson, *La religion de J.-J. Rousseau*, vol. III, 139.
- 37 Grimsley, *Rousseau's Religious Quest*, 62.
- 38 It is hard to shake the presumption that our noblest ideas originate from our most refined faculties. Ernst Cassirer (*The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*) and Robert Derathé (*Le rationalisme de J.-J. Rousseau*) have taken this position with respect to Rousseau, as has Timothy O'Hagan, *Rousseau* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 39 To the extent that he cast all *philosophes* as "missionaries of atheism," Rousseau oversimplified. With the exception of d'Holbach, the *philosophes* were not avowed atheists. Nevertheless, Rousseau's religious views did depart dramatically from the trajectory of the French Enlightenment. Rousseau's insistence on the centrality of religion to personal and moral wisdom, his advocacy of personal piety, and his support of a public role for religion placed him at odds with his intellectual contemporaries.
- 40 Rousseau used almost identical language in characterizing the *Social Contract*. (i:405; v:340)
- 41 Bruno Bernardi traces the development of the idea of a civil religion in Rousseau's *corpus* and concludes that Rousseau's civil religion, despite its positive prescriptions, was designed primarily to address the problem of intolerance. "La religion civile, institution de tolérance?" in *Rousseau and L'Infâme*, 153–72.
- 42 "I believe because I've always believed." (LF, iv:1134; viii:260)
- 43 Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 120–1.
- 44 Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, 60.
- 45 See, for example, R. I. Boss, "Rousseau's Civil Religion and the Meaning of Belief: An Answer to Bayle's Paradox," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 84 (1971) 123–93; Alfred Cobban, *Rousseau and the Modern State* (London: G. Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1934); Lester Crocker, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Macmillan, 1963) vol. II; and Steven Johnston, *Encountering*

- Tragedy: Rousseau and the Project of Democratic Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).
- 46 Christian Jacquet, *La Pensée religieuse de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université de Louvain, 1975) 167.
 - 47 Book VIII of the *Confessions* (i:392; v:329) is a good place to find this discussion.
 - 48 "Their apparent skepticism is a hundred times more assertive and more dogmatic than the decided tone of their adversaries." (*E*, iv:632; xiii:479)
 - 49 In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau states as plainly as can be that the purpose of the discussion of religion in the *Social Contract* is "not to consider religion as true or false, nor even as good or bad in itself, but exclusively in its relations to political bodies and as an aspect of lawgiving." (*LM*, iii:703; ix:147)
 - 50 These words are repeated almost verbatim in *Julie*. (ii:683; vi:561)
 - 51 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." For Rousseau, freedom lies neither in surrender to this spirit nor in the absence of constraints, but rather in individual agency: "It is not so much understanding which constitutes the distinction of man among the animals, as it is his being a free agent. Nature commands every animal, and the beast obeys. Man feels the same impetus, but he realizes that he is free to acquiesce or to resist; and it is above all in the consciousness of this freedom that the spirituality of his soul is shown." (*DI*, iii:141; iii:26)
 - 52 The dogmas of the civil religion are not described as self-imposed in the text. On the contrary, these dogmas are remarkable inasmuch as they mark the only moment in the text where Rousseau breaks from the precept that the people must give laws to themselves. The only other moment in the text where anything akin to this occurs is in Rousseau's discussion of the general will, where Rousseau posits that the law must be general in origin as well as in object. However, this could arguably be seen as a constitutive condition of the general will and not an externally imposed constraint. The dogmas of the civil religion seem not to fit into this category. As we will see below, however, Rousseau *did* conceive of the dogmas of the civil religion in this way, i.e., as the necessary precondition for the formulation and articulation of the general will.
 - 53 Toucheffe, *L'Antiquité et le Christianisme*, 399.
 - 54 Ronald Beiner claims that "Rousseau is unable to propose any solution that he himself regards as acceptable." ("Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," 617) Rousseau's civil religion, like his general will, is not proposed as a substantive doctrine, but rather as a framework, within which societies may equitably and viably constitute themselves. Just as Rousseau does not specify the substance of civil laws, neither does he prescribe the specifics of religious doctrine, both of which must be a reflection of particular culture and history. The general will provides a framework within which democratic debate can take place—popular sovereignty, equality, and legislation restricted to issues of common concern and applied to all equally. Likewise, the civil religion provides a framework—belief in God, the afterlife, tolerance, and reverence for the laws—within which every society may specify its own religious dogmas. If they are to be rendered consistent with republican principles, all civil religions will adhere to a set of basic principles. Beyond those essential principles, societies will themselves fill in the specifics of their religious doctrine.
 - 55 See Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 263–4.
 - 56 Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, 264.
 - 57 Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva*, 265.

- 58 For a nuanced discussion of Rousseau's attempts to satisfy the demands of both personal liberty and civic unity in the *Social Contract*'s chapter on civil religion, see Christopher Bertram, "Toleration and Pluralism in Rousseau's Civil Religion," in *Rousseau and L'Infâme*, 137–52.
- 59 Ghislain Waterlot, "Le discours des proselytes du vicaire et sa contradiction," in B. Bernardi, F. Guénard, and G. Silvestrini eds., *Religion, liberté, justice: sur les Lettres écrites de la montagne de J.-J. Rousseau* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2005).
- 60 For a nuanced account of the nature of this coercion, see Charles Griswold, "Liberty and Compulsory Civil Religion in Rousseau's *Social Contract*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53 (2015) 271–300.
- 61 R. A. Leigh provides the historical context for Rousseau's carefully articulated position on toleration. Although Rousseau wanted to support the religious liberty of French Protestants, he could not stake out a broad position in favor of freedom of conscience and worship without offending the Genevan patriciate, for whom a policy of religious toleration was out of the question. Geneva regarded its Calvinist religious establishment as a matter of self-preservation—the only thing standing between it and conquest by one of its stronger, Catholic neighbors. Consequently, in the *Letter to Beaumont*, Rousseau argued for religious tolerance but added the caveat that "foreign Religions" cannot "legitimately be introduced into a country without the permission of the Sovereign." (LB, iv:978; ix:61)
- 62 Rousseau intended to protect the people from Christian dogmatizing but felt compelled to introduce his own set of official tenets. There are certain principles that the state must establish as prerequisites to the communion we seek in both our civic and our spiritual lives. "The right that the social compact gives the Sovereign over the subjects does not exceed, as I have said, the limits of public utility. The subjects, therefore, do not have to account for their opinions to the Sovereign, except insofar as these opinions matter to the community. Now it matters greatly to the State that each Citizen have a Religion that causes him to love his duties; but the dogmas of that Religion are of no interest either to the State or to its members; except insofar as these dogmas relate to morality, and to the duties that anyone who professes it is obliged to fulfill toward others." (SC, iii:467–8; iv:222)
- 63 Beaumont could be seen as following Rousseau's suggestion in attacking him as an enemy of the civil religion. Rousseau would disagree, of course, but Beaumont could argue with Rousseau—as was no doubt his intention—over what constitutes an essential aspect of the Genevan civil religion (e.g., the infallibility of the Church, or the Trinity). Rousseau addressed this argument, dismissing it as vague and arguing that it does not "constitute proof." (LB, iv:1000; ix:78)
- 64 "They say that, in attacking superstition, I want to destroy Religion itself. How do they know that? Why do they confound these two causes, which I distinguish with so much care?" (LM, iii:695; ix:140–1)
- 65 "There were two Joly de Fleury brothers who successively held the post of *avocat général*. One of them was responsible for demanding the warrant for Rousseau's arrest issued by the Parlement of Paris." (Editor's note to the *Letter to Beaumont*, ix:321)

7 Reason

One of the many things that makes Rousseau so compelling is that, in the midst of a historical moment known for its elevation of reason, Rousseau embraced a series of non-philosophical, non-rational (not irrational) pathways to truth. Among the pathways to truth he embraced, Rousseau regarded reason as the least reliable. When properly constrained, reason *could* yield sublime truths, but, when exercised imperiously (as it ordinarily is), it leaves us less auspiciously positioned toward truth than we would be if we simply remained ignorant.¹ Reason opens up sophisticated possibilities, but it obscures what Rousseau calls the “sublime science of simple souls”—the unmediated love of existence, common to human beings in our natural state. (*DAS*, iii:30; ii:22) Rousseau did preserve a space for what he called “simple” or “natural” reason in his system, assigning it a critical, if subsidiary, role in understanding the “truths that pertain to human happiness.” Simple or intuitive reason, when properly circumscribed and tied to sentiment, can serve truth, but discursive or philosophical reason is, in Rousseau’s view, almost always corrupting. While it may make “association agreeable,” reason contributes more often than not to a coarsening of morals. (*E*, iv:767; xiii:591)

Rousseau understood reason as a faculty that manifests itself only upon entry into society and develops only with the development of society. Reason is, then, not natural, but the potential for it is. It remains latent until society is born, at which point it manifests, never to be retracted. It is a potentiality, which, once activated, cannot be deactivated. Reason began, Rousseau believed, with comparison, or, perhaps more accurately, comparison was the impetus for the development of reason. Prior to entering society, human beings had not yet begun to make comparisons between themselves and others. However, once “the first person . . . fenced off a plot of ground” and said “this is mine,” (*DI*, iii:164; iii:43) the need for comparison developed, most obviously the distinction between “mine” and “not mine.” From mine and not mine were born a series of distinctions that fueled the development and proliferation of *amour propre*: distinctions between the beautiful and the ugly, between rich and poor, between high and low. From the selfsame faculty of comparison, however,

the distinction between right and wrong was also born—the origin of all systems of morality and foundation of moral philosophy. So, both morality and the source of its corruption—*amour propre*—were born out of comparison. Reason, then, is coeval with both the source of moral corruption and with morality itself.

As human beings departed from their pre-rational natural state and transitioned into society, reason emerged and human consciousness became subject to transformative changes. Here it is important to emphasize the extent to which Rousseau's conception of human nature departed from that of previous state of nature theorists. For the early modern theorists of human nature with whom Rousseau was most familiar (Hobbes, Locke, and Grotius), human nature was essentially fixed. The transformation that occurs upon entry into society for these thinkers was a transformation in humanity's circumstances exclusively; it was not accompanied by an equal transformation in consciousness. For Rousseau, by contrast, the circumstantial transition from state of nature to society sparked a corresponding transformation in consciousness. Whereas human nature for Hobbes, Grotius, and Locke remained constant regardless of socio-historical context, for Rousseau human nature was malleable, subject to the social forces to which it is exposed. The term Rousseau used to describe this dynamic was "perfectibility." Human nature is susceptible to any number of changes or developments, reflective of the influences on it. Reason, therefore, has much more influence over our identity for Rousseau than it had for previous theorists of human nature (which may partially explain why Rousseau was so wary of it). For Hobbes, Grotius, and Locke, human beings were fundamentally the same in society as they were in the state of nature; only their circumstances had changed. For Rousseau, however, the same transition (from the state of nature to civil society) produced not just a change in circumstances but, as Rousseau famously put it in the *Social Contract*, it produced "a remarkable change in man." (iii:292; iv:85) Reason, on Rousseau's understanding, was protean, susceptible to being deployed either toward the elevation of the human spirit or toward its degradation. This ambivalence imposes on those who would deploy reason an obligation to do so carefully and modestly—to deploy it, in other words, within the constraints of an ethics of truthseeking. We must, as Rousseau put it, emulate those "pure spirits . . . who organize their voice to nature's" and "hasten to carry out her laws of providence." (*Autobiographical Fragment*, OC, i:1174) As we will see, for Rousseau this meant deploying reason only in response to an urgent, personal necessity and only in conjunction with sentiment.

Rousseau's approach sits in between sentimentalism and rationalism. It is neither "*pur sentimentalisme ni l'instinctivisme*," as Robert Derathé has put it, but neither is it, I argue in this chapter, *pur rationalisme*. It can be located between what we might now call emotivism and rationalism, taking something from both in pursuit of what Michael Frazer (referencing John Rawls) calls "reflective equilibrium," in his survey of Enlightenment

thought.² This is an equilibrium that originates in sentiment, which is, in turn, processed by reason, yielding convictions that are confirmed by sentiment. Rousseau favors sentiment, but reason plays an indispensable role as well. Accessing truth is the result of the proper balance between sentiment and reason; error, by contrast, results from an excess of either one. The primary foes of simple reason are philosophers, who make the mistake of relying too heavily on reason, and religious dogmatists, who do not exercise it enough. They are, consequently, destined to oscillate back and forth between dogmatism and doubt, never landing firmly on the truth.

Rousseau regarded philosophy, like society itself, as mired in the middle stage of history. It is a common mistake to read the combination of Rousseau's critique of modern society and his praise of the savage as an argument for a return to the state of nature. However, just as Rousseau proposed a new social contract as the solution for the degenerate one, so too did he favor a simple, intuitive reason—a “philosophy of the soul” (*FR*, iii:81; ii:117)—as the solution to the deficiencies of discursive reason. Rousseau's genuine philosophy steers a course between emotivism and rationalism, between dogmatism and doubt. It is more expansive and less dogmatic than the philosophy of modern intellectuals. It is not frightened, as Rousseau believed so many of his dogmatic adversaries were, “lest there be an examination of the pro and con!” but neither will it be mired in the doubt or skepticism that Rousseau associated with philosophical reason.³

As he frequently reminded his readers, Rousseau was not a systematic writer. Isolated passages permit a variety of interpretations of Rousseau's teaching on reason, partly as a consequence of his ambivalence on the subject, partly as a result of his imprecise use of language, and partly as a result of his personal evolution. It is safe to say that Rousseau defined reason as comparison and characterized it as mediated (in contrast to faith, sentiment and experience). We know that Rousseau preferred the immediate to the mediated, the intuitive to the discursive, the practical to the speculative, the simple to the systematic or philosophical. This gives us a sense of Rousseau's antipathy to what he called the “art of reasoning.” However, it is necessary to understand more than this. As reasoning agents, we will want to understand the circumstances under which reason becomes corrupted, as well those under which it maintains its integrity. And, as is the case with respect to Rousseau's other preferred pathways to truth, reason, if it is sincerely consecrated to the truth, will be guided by utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity.

In this chapter, I first take stock of the different invocations and connotations of reason in Rousseau's *corpus* (I). I then describe the role of utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity as constraints on reason (II), trace the evolution of Rousseau's views on reason (III), and summarize Rousseau's ethics of reason (IV).

I. Reason's Various Connotations in Rousseau's System

Rousseau believed that reason emerged at a particular stage of human development—namely, when human beings moved from conditions of relative isolation and solitude into conditions of frequent social intercourse. This development necessitated rules of interaction, which, in turn, necessitated a faculty that could make distinctions between mine and not mine, right and wrong, justice and injustice, and so forth. This was the birth of human beings as moral agents with the capacity to resist, reverse, and rechannel instincts and drives. It was the beginning of freedom in the moral sense; social men and women are not bound by their natural instincts the way the savage was. Most of the time, Rousseau associates these dimensions of reason with grief rather than joy. However, there are times when Rousseau refers to reason in unambiguously positive terms.⁴ There is, for example, a “universal justice,” Rousseau writes in the *Social Contract*, “emanating from reason alone.” (iii:378; iv:152) In the *Dialogues*, Rousseau laments the public’s immunity to reason as he recalls the early days of his literary career, when the public could still hear “the voice of truth and reason”—a voice for which we have an innate ear, so long as we are willing to listen. (*D*, i: 841; i:140) What are we listening to when we consult the inner voice? Rousseau tells us that it is our heart, which he elsewhere describes as synonymous with the voice of nature or the voice of God.

Sometimes reason connotes an ordered or composed soul (*NH*, ii:244; vi:200), and, in this sense, Rousseau always used it positively—reason as an ordering faculty, managing and organizing the sentiments. On other occasions, reason is described as a counterpoint to the senses, a repressive faculty deployed to keep feelings at bay. In this context, Rousseau is always reproachful. While there are feelings that must be suppressed, there are others that should be enhanced. When he is being more precise, Rousseau uses the phraseology of “simple reason” or “natural reason” to denote the proper balance between rational and non-rational and “philosophical reason” to denote the indiscriminate suppression of the non-rational to the rational.⁵ Ironically, the very philosophers who train themselves to be discriminating with respect to arguments fail to discriminate among the passions. Genuine philosophy, rather than suppressing the passions, will elicit those that elevate human beings. Rousseauian philosophy departs from philosophy’s traditional elevation of reason above the other human faculties. All of our faculties are good by nature, from a Rousseauian perspective, and so they all offer viable pathways to truth and happiness. Philosophy’s emphasis on the faculty of reason makes it the least reliable pathway to truth, although, undertaken within the constraints of ethical truthseeking, it can yield sublime results. What was certain for Rousseau was that an exclusively rational approach to the world could never lead to the truth. So Rousseauian philosophy must incorporate the more basic faculties, from which natural goodness originates.

As Rousseau developed his system, he began to open up a space for a reliable form of reason, which he referred to as “simple reason” or “natural reason.”⁶ This chastened, circumscribed form of reason is largely regulatory and must be understood in opposition to what Rousseau called “reflection,” which he regarded as proactive and assertive. Reflection is the form of reason Rousseau had in mind in his critique of modernity and philosophy. It is the capacity to compare and analyze the relationship between things, the same capacity that is at work in *amour propre*. *Amour propre* and morality can be thought of as specialized forms of reflection, the former emphasizing relative social status, the later making determinations between right and wrong. So, while “reflection” is generally given a negative charge in Rousseau’s system, even this risky mode of reasoning plays an important (though, as we will see, subordinate) role in moral agency.

Reason *can*, under the right circumstances, lead us to truth, but, because it tends toward the abstract—which is to say away from conscience, the heart, the *sentiment intérieur*—it is more susceptible to corruption. It was this status of detachment, which Kant would later valorize as the noumenal, that was for Rousseau the origin of so many philosophical errors. Set loose from any attachment to the *sentiment intérieur*, reason all too easily flies fancifully toward what is ornate, novel, or expedient at the expense of what is simple, heartfelt, or necessary.⁷ In *Emile*, Rousseau referred to this form of reasoning as “*le raisonnement*” or “*l’art de raison*,” which inclines toward increasingly complex formulations, combining simpler truths to develop ever more sophisticated systems. *Le raisonnement* is imperious, tending always toward generalization, extending itself indiscriminately. Those practicing the art of reason generalize and believe themselves to have found the truth when they do, since they have already decided that generality is the essence of truth. The problem though is that human beings are not capable of comprehending so many ideas at once. By generalizing, we abstract away from what our sentiment knows immediately to complicated generalities that overload our capabilities. (ML, iv:1090; xii:182) The truths we need most are simple, while the art of reasoning blinds us to those simple truths.

Rousseau’s critique of reason was really a critique of rationalism or of philosophical reason—a critique, in other words, of the elevation of reason typically associated with the Enlightenment. This leaves open the possibility of a more circumscribed, sentiment-driven form of reason that would not succumb to the pathologies Rousseau associated with philosophy. Reason is the most fraught pathway to truth in Rousseau’s *corpus*, tending all too often to subvert the more reliable pathways discussed in previous chapters. Nevertheless, as we will see in the final section of this chapter, reason can, when exercised properly, lead us to the truth.

In addition to these, there is another, largely innocuous invocation of reason in Rousseau’s work. That is, there are instances in which Rousseau invokes the term “*raison*” to characterize judgments that he regards as well-founded or valid. For example, in a letter to the Chevalier d’Éon, Rousseau

wrote, “Your religion is based on submission, and you submit. Mine is based on discussion, and I reason.” (CC, to Chevalier d’Eon, 31 March 1766, 5140, xxix:82) Here we must be careful not to read too much into Rousseau’s use of the term “reason.” He is not making a case for rationalism or the suppression of sentiment.⁸ His use of reason in this context is opposed to submission; it is an assertion of autonomy as against conformity rather than an assertion of reason against sentiment or intuition.⁹ Elsewhere, Rousseau writes, “our greatest idea of the divinity comes from reason alone.”¹⁰ Again, there may be a temptation to read this as an endorsement of discursive reason, but, in context, Rousseau is quite clearly opposing reason not to sentiment but to revelation. It is, in other words, an assertion of autonomy, not rationalism. Likewise, as Robert Derathé points out, when Rousseau exalts the “*culte de coeur*,” he is not disparaging reason but rather the “*culte extérieur*.¹¹ He is defending both reason and sentiment against an externally imposed orthodoxy. There was no opposition between sentiment and reason for Rousseau, as there had been, for example, for Pascal. And so the whole question of sentimentalism versus rationalism misrepresents Rousseau’s epistemology. His was a rationalism inspired, directed and confirmed by sentiment.

Similarly, Rousseau refers to “*la raison publique*” in the *Discourse on Political Economy* not as an assertion of reason as a faculty but in reference to the common good. (iii:142; iii:243)¹² In both cases—religion and politics—the truths Rousseau invokes are to be derived not from reason alone but from the ethics of truthseeking described in this book. What makes Rousseau’s religion reasonable is the same thing that leads republican citizens to the *raison publique*: utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity in pursuit of communion.

Finally, there is an important distinction to be drawn between the incipient or nascent form of reason invoked in the education of Emile and the birth of civilization and the fully developed faculty of reason Rousseau references in the context of a mature human being.¹³ Here, I am focused on the latter, and, consequently, the texts I emphasize focus on the role played by reason in a fully developed human being. This means that I have attended less to those passages in the second *Discourse* and in the early books of *Emile*, which focus on incipient reason, whether it be in humanity’s transition from a pre-rational natural state to a highly rational social one or Emile’s transitions through pre-rational, instrumentally rational, and morally rational stages of development.

II. Conditions for the Good Use of Reason

Among the most fundamental principles of what Rousseau called his “system” is the notion that the only truths worth pursuing are those that “pertain to human happiness.” These truths are profoundly simple by their nature, although they can appear to be complicated to those who have become alienated from them in the process of socialization. In society, our

relationship to these essential truths becomes increasingly mediated, such that we come to believe that we must arrive at them circuitously. Intellectuals are such a target for Rousseau because they benefit most from this mediated relationship and, correspondingly, have the biggest stake in its continuation. The more complicated essential truths become, the more we will need sophisticated philosophical systems to grasp them. Rousseau was exceptional for his historical era in so many ways, not least because his basic presuppositions were antithetical to the spirit of the age: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man." That basic principle implies that reason is at best unnecessary and at worst corrupting. The presupposition of Rousseau's inquiries—natural goodness—predetermines its outcome: "I always return to my principle . . . I study what is . . . and find that what is, is good." (*E*, iv:732; xiii:561) Had human beings never left the state of nature, we would have no need for reason at all. Having made the decision to do so, we now cannot get along without it, but our happiness depends on when and how it is deployed. Exercised well, reason will be guided by utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity.

i. Utility

As explained in chapter three, by utility I mean to capture Rousseau's preference that we be guided, first and foremost, by our most urgent and pressing personal needs. In our original state, we do not require reason to meet these needs; there is nothing in human nature that necessitates a faculty of reason. While human nature contains the capacity for reason, nothing necessitates its activation, *until* the decision is made to live in societies. Rousseau laments this decision in the second *Discourse*:

Behold all our faculties developed, memory and imagination brought into play, *amour propre* aroused, reason rendered active, and the mind having almost reached the limit of the perfection of which it is susceptible. Behold all the qualities put into action, the rank and fate of each man established, not only upon the quantity of goods and the power to serve or harm, but also upon the mind, beauty, strength, or skill, upon merit or talents. And these qualities being the only ones which could attract consideration, it was soon necessary to have them or to affect them; for one's own advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than one in fact was. . . . All these evils are the first effect of property, and the inseparable consequence of nascent inequality. (*DI*, iii:51–2; iii:174–5)

This passage is critical to understanding Rousseau's idiosyncratic conception of reason. Reason develops in response to these things and fuels them in turn: competition, rivalry, consuming ambition, a multitude of new needs,

and, of course, political inequality. It is a product of comparison and the need to compare—present to past and future (the savage lives only in the present), wealthy to poor, common to aristocratic, beautiful to plain, fanciful to ordinary. In short, the birth and development of reason traces the birth and development of inequality and then justifies inequality in turn.

What is it about comparison—a seemingly innocuous faculty—that tends so frequently toward corruption? Comparison, after all, allows us to make all kinds of judgments, including differentiating between right and wrong.¹⁴ Rousseau's critique of reflection mirrors his critique of the arts in and sciences. In theory, reflection *could* be deployed toward justice and happiness, but, more often than not, it is used to make morally corrosive distinctions between inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, talented and untalented.

Reflection is productive in a way that natural man would find superfluous. To the reflecting mind, nothing is static; reflection can always become something other than what it is. It can create and re-create worlds without any foundation. This worried Rousseau, even if it was thrilling for many of his contemporaries. Reflection introduces new needs, which, more often than not, threaten happiness. However, reflection also gives us the capacity to access exalted forms of happiness unavailable to us in our natural state. Reflection marks the beginning of self-consciousness; by nature, we are conscious of our existence, but our consciousness is immediate, operating exclusively in the present. We lack the capacity to plan, dream, or reminisce. Reflection takes us out of the present, either by comparison to a future state (e.g., dreaming and planning) or a past one (e.g., reminiscing). It also takes us out of ourselves, allowing for a consciousness of oneself as distinct from others, which can be deployed either toward ambitious ends (*amour propre*) or toward moral ones (justice).

If natural reason represented the reasoner's path to truth, it was philosophical reason that embodied the blind alley. The “philosopher” lurks in the background (sometimes entering the foreground) of Rousseau's texts. He is a significant Rousseauean character, a construct designed to capture everything Rousseau despised about philosophy as practiced by his contemporaries. The “philosopher” appears in the second *Discourse*, for example, to demonstrate his indifference to the suffering of a fellow human being: “by means of philosophy [one] says, at the sight of a suffering man, perish if you wish, I am safe.” (DI, iii:156; iii:37) If the savage's opposite is social man, his polar opposite is the philosopher. The savage has no vices; social man develops them all, and the philosopher perfects them. Prejudice, which develops inevitably in society and is even necessary to it, is disastrous for philosophy. And yet prejudice pervades philosophy, and this leads philosophers to make judgments where they ought to refrain—where judgment is, in other words, unnecessary. Rousseau insists that Emile will be raised in opposition to philosophy, conscious of his prejudices with the ability to limit his judgments to that which he knows to be necessary and that which he knows to be true.¹⁵

Rousseau's concerns about reason's capacity to corrupt were always stronger than his enthusiasm for its capacity to communicate the essential truths of human happiness. Reverie, republicanism, and religion are much surer pathways to truth, because they emerge from and draw on sentiment. Like anything else in society, they too are susceptible to corruption, but not to the extent that reason is. Being grounded firmly in our sentiments, which are naturally good, reverie, republicanism, and religion incline us toward the truths useful to justice and happiness. Reason is much more protean, more imperious; it is active and aggressive and, therefore, of the four, it is the most susceptible to the pernicious influences of a corrupt society.

ii. Autonomy

By autonomy, I mean to evoke Rousseau's aversion to "party men" and his repeated insistence on thinking for oneself or, more specifically, following the "internal *dictamen*" of one's heart. Reason is reliable if it is autonomous, derived from precepts made available by the creator and inscribed in nature.

. . . there is no true progress of reason in the human species, because all that is gained on one side is lost on the other: all minds always start from the same point, and since the time used in finding out what others have thought is wasted for learning to think for ourselves, we have acquired more enlightenment and less vigor of mind. (*E*, iv:676; xiii:343)

Rousseau insisted that there was little to be gained from reading the arguments of others: "We exercise our minds, like our arms, by having them do everything with tools and nothing by themselves." (*E*, iv:676; xiii:343) As might be expected from a man who was himself self-taught, Rousseau believed that reason must be developed autonomously, in response to necessity and free of the influence of others. Emile's education is managed with precisely these ideals in mind, as the tutor puts his student in circumstances where an urgent necessity requires him to think for himself.

A good reasoner does not stand on the shoulders of others. She must start from the essential truths evident in nature. Rousseau's method is Cartesian in this sense, both in the *Reveries* and in *Emile*.¹⁶ We must suspend all those truths we think we understand and accept as true only those basic principles communicated to us through our inner voice. She who would employ reason well (perhaps a tiny minority) must do so as a genuine philosopher does, reasoning from clear, self-evident principles. Most people end up reasoning as public philosophers do—casuistically under the constraints of externally influenced prejudices. For them, which is to say, for us, reasoning will not get us any closer to truth and will very likely distance us from it. Most of us are capable of only the most basic insights, and, Rousseau frequently urges, we ought to be content with what we can know with certainty.

Reason is reliable if it derives from oneself (from *amour de soi*), rather than from the outside (from *amour propre*). Lost in the woods, Emile must use astronomy to recover his bearings; it is a matter of necessity. Emile adopts this science only because he must, not because he can or because social pressure has driven him to it. Like Emile in the woods, we too are lost, having chosen the path toward civilization, a path that led us away from ourselves. Reason, properly deployed, can get us back, though we would be far better off turning to sentiment or faith. While sentiment and faith allow unmediated access to truth, reason throws up intermediaries. Reason functions in consciousness the way a priest does in the Church—by filtering and, therefore, obscuring nature's pure voice.

Naturally man knows how to suffer with constancy and dies in peace. It is doctors with their prescriptions, philosophers with their precepts, priests with their exhortations, who debase his heart and make him unlearn how to die. (*E*, iv:270; xiii:182)

What do priests, doctors, and philosophers have in common? They all erect intermediaries between human beings and themselves—priests get between us and our soul, doctors between us and our body, philosophers between us and our thoughts. We naturally know God and his precepts, just as we naturally know how to suffer, and naturally know how to think. It's not that there is nothing we need to know about these things; it is rather that we can know what we need to know only by consulting ourselves.

iii. Immediacy

By immediacy, I mean to evoke Rousseau's preference for sentiment and experience over reflection and philosophy. Reason tends to be imperious and aggressive, especially in the young. This is why Emile's tutor delays his introduction to it. Armed with reason, we are inclined to issue judgments, to become dogmatic and closed off from the world. We tend to ignore exceptions experienced with age and maturity, opting instead for general propositions. This is not a love of truth but a love of an "*esprit du système*," as Julie puts it in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. (ii:427, vi:352) Once St. Preux develops a sincere love of truth, he ceases in his attempts to become learned and, as Julie puts it, "one learns much more from him." (*NH*, ii:427; vi:352) Experience and sentiment are the foundation of reliable knowledge. These are the most personal, unmediated access points for human beings.

Intelligence was for Rousseau a formal faculty with no intrinsic nobility, even if civilized men and women confuse it with virtue. It performs a regulative function, crucial, but subordinate, to the real sources of justice and happiness. "Do you want to cultivate your pupil's intelligence?" Rousseau asks in *Emile*.

Cultivate the strengths it ought to govern. Exercise his body continually; make him robust and healthy in order to make him wise and reasonable.

Let him work, be active, run, yell, always be in motion. Let him be a man in his vigor and soon he will be one in his reason. (*E*, iv:359; xiii:255)

We already know all we need to know, because all we need to know are the principles of “justice and moral truth” inscribed in the soul, to which Rousseau gives the name “conscience.” (*ML*, iv:1108; xii:195) Nothing in our nature inclines us toward knowledge for its own sake; rather we must know only what is useful. Our faculties are not intended for the study of the world, and they are not up to the task. Strange as it may sound to us, ignorance can be healthy, according to Rousseau. This is because human beings always already have access to the wisdom sufficient to their happiness and do not require additional refinements. “The use of reason that leads man to the knowledge of his duties is not very complex.” (*E*, iv:731; xiii:560) Our nature does not need to be repressed or transformed in order for us to be happy. We do not need philosophy or any other sophisticated mode of reasoning to grasp the truths necessary to happiness.

Reason’s essential function is to discern and order the sentiments most conducive to human flourishing. Sentiment is the source of and motivation for our actions, while reason plays the important but secondary role of managing, regulating, or ordering.¹⁷ Properly activated, reason functions as a constraint on itself, as well as our other faculties; it designates both its own place and that of our other faculties. Reason, properly exercised, is reactive as opposed to proactive; it is engaged by, and responds to, sentiments elicited by its environment, both internal and external to consciousness. The closer we tie ourselves to nature, the more likely those sentiments are to be pure; the more enmeshed we become in society, the more likely they are to be depraved. Reason, in a social context, tends to become detached from authentic needs, as it is made to serve the artificial needs Rousseau associates with *amour propre*. At the extreme, reasoners imagine themselves to be detached from sentiment altogether, which defined philosophy, as practiced in modern Europe.¹⁸

iv. Simplicity

By simplicity, I mean to evoke Rousseau’s aversion to the sophisticated and systematic. Rousseau’s critique of reflection is, in large part, a critique of its tendency toward sophistication: “Man is born to act and think, and not to reflect,” as Rousseau put it in the *Preface to Narcissus*. (ii:970; ii:195) Thinking is frequently necessary in society, but what Rousseau here calls “reflection” is idle and self-indulgent.

“Intellectual curiosity,” so beloved by Rousseau’s contemporaries, was, for him, self-indulgent and unnecessary to human happiness; he believed it was “vain” and caused “evils.” (*DAS*, iii:9; ii:7) Curiosity becomes one of many artificial needs, created in response to *amour propre*. Needs proliferate in the context of *amour propre*, which is insatiable. We ought to focus

only on what we need to be happy, but, instead, we imagine what it might be like to pursue knowledge beyond happiness. We ought to master and practice the “sublime science of simple souls,” but, instead, we choose to go beyond it and consequently move only further away from happiness. It was “eternal wisdom” that placed us in a “happy ignorance.” Nature “wanted to keep you from being harmed by science,” Rousseau writes in the first *Discourse*, “just as a mother wrests a dangerous weapon from her child’s hands.” (iii:15; ii:12) Rousseau does not deny that curiosity is a commonly experienced inclination (in society). However, as with many of our inclinations, we must learn to control our curiosity, deploying it only when necessity demands it and never for its own sake. It may be only human to want to see for oneself, but, if so, then it is our destiny to be miserable. A few exceptional philosophers will avoid this fate, but falsehood is far more likely and far more dangerous than these truths are useful. (*DAS*, iii:18; ii:13) The really necessary useful truths can be known without philosophy and so philosophy, like our other vices, is the product of artificial needs.

Often one compromises in regard to one’s duties by dint of reflecting on them. . . . One does not need to know Cicero’s *Offices* to be a good man, and the most decent woman in the world perhaps has the least knowledge of what decency is. (*E*, iv:767; xiii:591)

If, like most men and women, we must live in society, we will not be able to do without forms reason, and so the question becomes how to make proper use of this faculty. It is here that Rousseau argues for simple reason over abstract reflection. In the remainder of this chapter, I will map the evolution of Rousseau’s views of reason and attempt to describe more specifically the model of reasoning Rousseau defended as a pathway to truth and those that he repudiated as blind alleys.

III. Rousseau’s Writings on Reason

Rousseau, as he never tired of reminding his readers, was not a systematic writer. He did not regard consistency in the use of language as a virtue, emphasizing instead the evocative, persuasive dimensions of writing. Consequently, it is often left to his interpreters to clarify Rousseau’s intention. In short, there is no substitute for reading Rousseau’s texts. In the following exegetical section, I flesh out and sharpen the distinction between simple or natural reason and philosophical or discursive reason, through a reading of those texts in which Rousseau makes reason a central theme. Rousseau’s writings on reason begin with an initial, almost polemical critique of reason, originating in Rousseau’s opposition to the rationalism or philosophical reason he regarded as pervasive in European philosophical or academic discourse. Later, in *Julie* and *Emile*, Rousseau emphasizes the role of reason in the development of a well-formed human being, using St. Preux and Emile

as case studies. Finally, in the *Moral Letters* and *Reveries*, Rousseau considers the role of reason in the developed human being, which results in a circumscribed role for reason and an elevation of sentiment. Because Rousseau's treatment of reason moves through these relatively discrete stages, it is helpful to consider his views on reason as they develop in his writings.

Discourse on the Arts and Sciences

Rousseau's thinking on reason evolved from an early, critical posture, which acknowledged reason's positive attributes without inquiring into them, to a more nuanced account of the conditions under which reason could be useful. For reasons made obvious by the essay's title, the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* focused on philosophical or discursive reason. Rousseau's argument here is the argument of an audacious young man, looking to make his mark. He overstates his position in order to shock his readers, to jolt them out of what he perceived to be complacency. It is an argument reminiscent of Thrasymachus's notorious assault on justice in Book I of Plato's *Republic*. Rousseau advances a case against reason much as Thrasymachus did against justice, in part at least, to vindicate a simple, impartial reason. Just as Thrasymachus criticized justice in order to see it nobly defended, so too did Rousseau castigate reason (as rationalism) in order to vindicate a simpler, genuine instantiation of it. The arts and sciences so disturbed Rousseau because they had, by their very ascendancy, depreciated far sturdier pathways to truth—faith and love of the *patrie*, in particular, but reason as well, the simple reason extolled at the end of the first *Discourse*.

In this essay, Rousseau associates the rise of the arts and sciences with the rise of rationalism and reflection (and the corresponding marginalization of simple or intuitive reason). The arts and sciences reward a particular style of reasoning—one that produces increasingly sophisticated comparisons culminating in the proliferation of “systems” of thought, which generate attention and honor for their authors. Here, Rousseau began his practice of deploying traditional compliments like “erudite” and “learned” as pejoratives. In fact, as Rousseau clarified in a reply to a critic of the first *Discourse*, it is learning more than reason that obstructs truth; the intellect, Rousseau argued, is already as sophisticated as it needs to be without also becoming learned. (*FR*, iii:81; ii:117) In *Emile*, Rousseau will extend this claim further. Having turned “erudite” and “learned” into insults, Rousseau gives ignorance a positive charge, though, to be sure, it is a studied ignorance. Enlightenment, the tutor teaches, depends less on how much one knows than it does on knowing “how to be ignorant.” (*E*, iv:633; xiii:480) Knowing how to be ignorant—how to preserve the right kind of ignorance, which is to say, how to insulate oneself from the wrong kind of “learning”—is perhaps the most important thing to know, but it is unfortunately something that modern philosophers will not—cannot—even consider, because it

runs against their essential presuppositions. Philosophy is, in this way, like religious fanaticism; both are the product of an unthinking, blind adherence and both refuse to question their own premises.

In the first *Discourse*, Rousseau criticizes philosophy for two seemingly irreconcilable reasons. Philosophy is criticized both for its protean flexibility—its capacity to sustain any position—and for its tendency toward dogmatism. On the one hand, Rousseau attacks philosophers for their willingness to embrace any argument. On the other hand, he regards philosophy as a quasi-religious sect: It is a prejudice that had corrupted the people; the people have adopted a “sect,” Rousseau would later write, meaning that it “no longer thinks for itself but follows only the impressions given to it by its guides.” (*D*, i:841; i:140) This philosophical sect had given the veneer of objectivity while in fact serving primarily to provide cover for indulging the passions.

It is *amour propre* that accounts for philosophy’s perverse combination of openness and dogmatism. Philosophers are more interested in being first, or different, or unique, than they are in being right, and “there is not a single one of them who, if he came to know the true and false, would not prefer the lie he has found to the truth found by another.” (*E*, iv:569; xiii:428) They would rather attack others than defend themselves; destructive criticism becomes their only competency, which is especially perverse considering their ostensible idols are originality and creativity. A philosopher becomes full-fledged when he severs his various human attachments and becomes a cipher for *amour propre*.¹⁹ The philosopher’s vanity increases in direct proportion to his contempt for others, and every time he devalues his fellow men, his opinion of himself grows in proportion, until he loves only himself. It was the opposite quality—a love of one’s fellows even at the expense of oneself—that distinguished Socrates’s genuine philosophy from the perverse philosophy of modern Europe, which Rousseau regarded as driven by a love of self even to the detriment of one’s fellows.²⁰ The love of others, to which a genuine philosopher would dedicate herself, depends on the flourishing of traditional, even old-fashioned ideas, against which the modern quest for originality must necessarily stand opposed.

A point of pride for philosophers is that they “judge [men] at their worth,” rather than by prejudices or ascribed characteristics. (*PN*, ii:967; ii:192) This idea seems praiseworthy even to this day, but, for Rousseau, it reflected an eagerness to remove individuals from the various attachments that validate life in society, in particular love of the fatherland and love of God—the convictions that enoble social men and women in those relatively rare cases where they can be ennobled. The first philosophers praised virtue, but, once those books had been written, everyone began to search for the gap in the literature. It became necessary to either criticize virtue or find something else to praise: “Hobbes, Mandeville and a thousand others have pretended to distinguish themselves among us . . . by opening up contrary routes.” (*PN*, ii:965–6; ii:191) Consequently, philosophers compete to

stake out different positions and then publish repudiations of anyone who disagrees with them: "If you count votes," Rousseau wrote in *Emile* "each is reduced to his own." (E, iv:568; xiii:427) Here Rousseau suggests that philosophers have no principles at all; that their embrace of atheism and cosmopolitanism is largely expedient rather than sincere. They argue against religion and patriotism, Rousseau suggests, only because public opinion favors them. They do not themselves hate religion or patriotism; they hate only those who stand in the way of their ambitions. If they believed extolling the virtues of religion or patriotism could make them famous, Rousseau implies, they would heartily trumpet away; it is only because ancient wisdom is built on these values that modern philosophers must attack them.

For all of its superficial sophistication and complexity, philosophical reason is ultimately reductionist: "I should have been indignant at those frivolous men who, with their wretched hair-splitting, debased the sublime simplicity of the Gospel and reduced the doctrine of Jesus Christ to syllogisms." (O, iii:44; ii:44) Philosophy makes whatever it studies speak its language. Consequently, the spiritual and poetic dimensions of religion are lost as Christianity is reduced to philosophical language. It is not surprising, to take another example, that philosophers would prefer Athens to Sparta; their method of inquiry predetermines their conclusions. More than that, their method prevents them from considering Sparta equitably or even asking the right questions about it. Philosophy had become a discipline, in Rousseau's view, imposing itself on its subject matter, rather than allowing its subject matter to speak through it. It was no longer the study of the world but a particular way of ordering it, no longer the love of wisdom but a particular view of what constitutes wisdom. Modern philosophy was constitutively incapable of recognizing the superiority of Sparta or the greatness of Cato. Rousseau regarded it as a sign of modern corruption that its philosophers ridiculed Cato, while ancient philosophers had praised him. (FR, iii:87–8; ii:122)

Rousseau's critique of philosophy was reminiscent of Plato's critique of poetry: "It is only the wicked who are famous; the good are forgotten or made ridiculous." (E, iv:527; xiii:392)²¹ Philosophers espouse what they think will attract attention and hold interest, at the expense of the ordinary, the "sublime science of simple souls." Natural goodness lacks the allure and the ostentation of sophisticated philosophical argument, and so philosophers cannot be relied on to acknowledge its primacy. Philosophers cannot be trusted for the same reason that Plato believed poets could not: They subordinate justice to entertainment. Whereas, for Plato, the argument was between philosophy and poetry, for Rousseau, it was between natural goodness, on the one hand, and both philosophy and poetry, on the other (between the immediacy of nature and the mediation of language).²² Whereas Plato believed that philosophy could reveal truths that the poets had obscured, Rousseau believed that the only truths we really need are available to us independent of either philosophy or poetry.

Real understanding of all kinds meant immediacy for Rousseau. Immediacy is the animating theme of the vicar's profession of faith, of solitary reverie, of the savage's natural goodness, and of the citizen's love of the *patrie*. Society is born with language, tools, and property, all of which created mediated relations, either to nature or to other human beings. So, at their root, the truths apprehended in republican citizenship are no different from the truths apprehended in the vicar's natural philosophy, the Walker's solitary, sentimental reveries, or the savage's *amour de soi*, all of which require the overcoming of mediated social relations. Philosophy, by contrast, was generally not a reliable path to truth for Rousseau because it valorized the sophistication of mediation and disdained the simplicity of immediacy. Good citizenship and natural religion tend to be simple and rustic; sophistication, by contrast, tends to enfeeble, which is one of Rousseau's principal arguments against it.²³ The philosopher's "enthusiasm for the marvels of understanding" is compelling in its own way, but, like many of our enthusiasms, it must be "guided by reason and wisely managed" because it comes at the expense of *civisme*, which is "infinitely more sublime and more able to uplift and enoble the soul." (*DAS*, iii:82–3; ii:118–9) Rousseau was revolutionary in his critique of sophistication—the first to suggest that it might come at the price of more cherished values. If he was right, then the lust for knowledge is to be treated like any other form of lust—neither good nor bad in itself but capable of great evil if left to operate without constraint.

Virtue is simple and is usually corrupted by learning. Virtuous societies will, therefore, be at most indifferent to the arts and sciences and perhaps even hostile toward them. This was a negligible price to pay, in Rousseau's mind, because, as Rousseau put it, "Ostentatious taste is rarely combined in the same souls with the taste for honesty." (*DAS*, iii:20; ii:15) In the *Preface to Narcissus*, he added:

A taste for philosophy loosens in us all the bonds of esteem and benevolence that attach men to society, and this is perhaps the most dangerous of the ills engendered by it. The charm of study soon renders any other attachment insipid. Furthermore, by dint of reflecting on humanity, by dint of observing men, the Philosopher learns to appreciate them according to their worth, and it is difficult to have very much affection for what one holds in contempt. (ii:967; ii:192)

In this text, Rousseau's description is more than just conceptual. He performs a brief phenomenology of the modern subject, who first comes to despise people, and then focuses exclusively on himself:

Soon he concentrates into his person all the interest that virtuous men share with their fellows: his amour-propre increases in the same proportion as his indifference to the rest of the universe. For him, family, fatherland become words void of meaning. (*PN*, ii:967; ii:192)

At this point, Rousseau proclaims, “he is a philosopher.” And yet Rousseau cautions his readers against a blanket repudiation of learning.²⁴ It is possible, in other words, to be both learned and virtuous, but the odds are against it, and, therefore, the real argument of the first *Discourse* is not that “science and virtue are incompatible,” but that “the cultivation of the sciences corrupts the morals of a nation.” (O, iii:39, ii:39) Philosophy is the most circuitous, least reliable pathway to truths that are available to us in several far more reliable forms. A few learned individuals will manage to arrive at the truth by philosophical means, but far more will be corrupted by it. Meanwhile, those willing to turn away from sophisticated philosophical systems and the *amour propre* they represent will find that the “sublime science of simple souls” speaks to them in a variety of registers.

“Genuine philosophy,” Rousseau writes, is the “voice of one’s conscience in the silence of the passions.” (DAS, iii:30; ii:22) Citizenship was probably Rousseau’s favored path, and certainly the most joyful one, to this inner voice. “True philosophers” understand that philosophy is to be limited; they understand what nature keeps from all of us in our original state and from some of even in society (rustics). These philosophers know that human beings are not born to become learned. The well-known concluding pages of the first *Discourse* are not a plea for philosophy; they are a plea for “learned men of the first rank” who will make real justice a possibility by placing the enlightenment of citizens over coercion. These “learned men” understand first and foremost the limitations of learning. (DAS, iii:30; ii:22) Socrates is praised by name as someone who appreciated the value of ignorance (the perils of aspirations to be learned). To remain wise is not to argue for something but to “resist the general torrent.” (DAS, iii:13; ii:9) Truth is not something that must be discovered; it is something that must be protected, something that we always already have, if only we are willing to look in the right place.

Though Rousseau would later develop a defense of intuitive or simple reason, his critique of philosophy only intensified over the course of his life. By the time he composed the *Dialogues* (1772–1776), Rousseau seemed have had all he could take: “In this generation nurtured on philosophy and bile, nothing is easier for conspirators than to make this general appetite for hatred fall on anyone they choose.” (D, i:891; i:179) Rousseau was misunderstood because his ideas were, as he put it, as “contrary to the philosophic spirit” of his era as could be. Doubt, for example, which was so central to the philosophical discourse of the eighteenth century, was, for Rousseau, a problem only in the context of philosophical discourse. “Nothing is as self-assured as ignorance, and doubt is as rare among the People as affirmation is in true Philosophers.” (*Discourse on the Virtue Most Necessary for a Hero*, ii:1265; iv:4) Philosophy creates the problem of doubt. Descartes, in Rousseau’s view, had tried to philosophize his way out of the problem of doubt without realizing that it is philosophy itself that had created the problem in the first place.

The problem of doubt, so central to Voltaire, Kant, Hume, Descartes, and most of Enlightenment philosophy was, for Rousseau, a false problem. In his reaction to Voltaire's poem on the Lisbon earthquake, Rousseau repudiated Voltaire's profound doubts about the goodness of existence. As usual, Rousseau argued on utilitarian grounds. Voltaire's worldview must be wrong, according to Rousseau, because his poem detracts from human happiness, by making it more difficult to commune with nature and God in enjoyment of the sentiment of existence. "If it is necessary to choose between two errors"—an excess of faith in God's goodness, on the one hand, and excessive pessimism about God's indifference to suffering, on the other, Rousseau's choice was clear: "I like the first one . . . better." (LV, iv:1061; iii:109) The goodness of existence—Rousseau's fundamental principle—prejudices his thought (in the good way) toward a vindication of human existence. Even if a belief in God's goodness is vulnerable to a rationalist critique, the utilitarian advantages of maintaining this conviction provide sufficient justification for it.

Later in the letter, Rousseau wrote that philosophers, "in comparing what is good and bad always forget the sweet feeling of existence." (LV, iii:111; iv:1063) Instead, as Rousseau wrote in the first *Discourse*, they choose to ponder:

. . . in what proportion bodies attract each other in a vacuum; what are, in the orbits of planets, the ratios of areas covered in equal time intervals; what curves have conjugate points, points of inflexion, and cusps; how man sees everything in God; how soul and body could be in harmony, like two clocks, without communicating; which stars could be inhabited; what insects breed in an extraordinary manner—answer me, I say, you from whom we have received so much sublime knowledge: had you taught us none of these things, would we consequently be fewer in number, less well governed, less formidable, less flourishing or more perverse? (DAS, iii:18–19; ii:13)

The problem with philosophy is not that it always causes harm; the problem is rather that it almost always causes harm and, on those occasions when it does not, it provides nothing necessary. The genuine philosophy that Rousseau envisions at the end of the first *Discourse* will focus exclusively on the truths essential to human happiness; it will not waste time on the investigation of vacuums and clocks. Moreover, it will accept prejudice as inevitable and focus not on its eradication but on the cultivation of those prejudices that are most useful to human flourishing. Opinions or prejudices are generally replaced by other prejudices or opinions, not by cool reason. Genuine philosophers understand the utility of opinions and appeal to the noble sentiments that provide a much sturdier foundation for virtue than reason would. It is beauty that draws us to morality, not rationality; we are persuaded more than we are convinced of moral truth. (LM, iii:727–28; ix:166)

Genuine philosophers will privilege virtue above all else, including reason, in order to ensure that reason is deployed only in service to human happiness. They will protect the basic principles of virtue, without becoming dogmatic with regard to how virtue is cultivated. These genuine philosophers will be ecumenical, in other words, in their embrace of faith, sentiment, *and* reason as critical to the flourishing of a virtuous republic.

Modern philosophy is removed from nature, from “Teutonic rusticity” and “Italian pantomime,” as Rousseau puts it. (*DAS*, iii:7; ii:5) It is, in other words, highly mediated. Teutonic simplicity and Italian pantomime, with which Rousseau begins the first *Discourse*, would seem a far cry from the Socratic philosophy with which he ends it. Socrates’s rationalism (some would say his hyper-rationalism) would initially seem antithetical to the simple immediacy of Teutonic rusticity, and yet Socrates is exempted from Rousseau’s attack on philosophy. Socrates was a “true philosopher,” according to Rousseau, by which he seems to mean that Socrates did not dogmatize.²⁵ Rousseau’s Socrates kept an open mind, unaffected by the vanities and ambitions of his contemporaries. Rousseau focuses here on Socrates’s method in Plato’s early dialogues, where he opened up questions, rather than answering them. Socrates’s philosophy was geared specifically to combat dogmatism. It was this authentic openness that made Socrates a “true philosopher,” in Rousseau’s view. His philosophy was motivated exclusively by his need to know and not, as sophists like Thrasymachus were, by the desire to appear knowledgeable. Socrates’s philosophy, like Rousseau’s, is entirely internal. There is such a thing as “philosophy of the soul” which is true (useful) and can make a people great. *This* philosophy, Rousseau says, is not learned in books. (*FR*, iii:81; ii:117)

Modern philosophers reverse Socrates’s method of inquiry. Rather than allowing nature to speak for them, they impose their prejudices on it. In one of his replies to the critics of the first *Discourse*, Rousseau describes science as undeniably good in itself: to know is to participate in God’s divine wisdom. Unfortunately, science, as practiced in modern society, bears no resemblance to science “in itself,” as described by Rousseau. (*O*, iii:36; ii:37) When Rousseau attacks the modern abuse of science, he refers to as “the sciences,” by which he means the disciplines and their elaborate systems, which scientists impose on the world. This reverses the methodology of the true scientist or genuine philosopher, who engages the world without ulterior motive and allows knowledge to emerge from nature’s inherent order.

Julie or La Nouvelle Héloïse

Rousseau’s critique of reason continues in his novel, *Julie*, primarily through Rousseau’s depiction of St. Preux’s exposure to city life. On leaving the provincial Clarens estate, St. Preux’s simple reason, cultivated in the country, becomes corrupted by exposure to society and its cult of reason, which its practitioners deploy in every direction without regard for utility. Reason is

by its nature simple and intended only for very limited, practical purposes, embodied in the text by the character of Wolmar.²⁶ Reason misleads only when it is deployed in “futile speculations” for which it is not intended. St. Preux writes to Julie that the moment he goes out into society, his reason is corrupted, and he is told that only appearances matter, that he “must take prejudices for principles, proprieties for laws, and that the most sublime wisdom consists in living like fools.” (*NH*, ii:255; vi:209) Society and corruption function as equivalents in the text. By contrast, Clarens represents those ancient societies, so admired by Rousseau, in which morality thrives and reason is deployed only toward simple, well-intended ends. St Preux’s movement from country to city is akin to this historic movement from simple, agrarian societies built on virtue to modern, corrupt cities in which the arts and sciences flourish.

Julie is most obviously a love story, but the novel can also be read more philosophically, as an account of reason and its proper use. On this reading, the order and harmony of life at Clarens embodies the simple reason that Rousseau associates with moral duty. The movement of the story develops out of two threats to the moral order of the Clarens estate—society on one side and romantic love on the other. Society threatens to corrupt St. Preux’s morality, while romantic love threatens to make him forget it. *Julie* can be read as story about finding the right amount of reason by avoiding the corrupt passions (*amour propre*) that pervade social life and the irrationality that accompanies erotic love. The former arises from what might be called an excess of reason, the latter from its absence.

Philosophy, for St. Preux, as for Rousseau, suggests rationalism or the suppression of sentiment in favor of reason. It makes sense, in this context, to speak of an excess of reason. In a letter to St. Preux, Julie reminds him

. . . of all those subtle arguments you yourself taught me to scorn, which fill so many books and have never made an honorable man. Ah! those sad reasoners! What sweet ecstasies their hearts have never felt nor given! My friend, leave aside those vain moralists, and search your soul; it is there you will find that sacred fire that so often kindled in us with the love of sublime virtues. (*NH*, ii:223; vi:183)

Philosophy is associated in the novel with excessive reason, which the “passions constantly sully.” (*NH*, ii:223; vi:183) So, both reason and the passions threaten to divert us from the truth.²⁷ Wolmar embodies the proper balance—a love for his family, grounded in a love of virtue—while St. Preux moves alternately between the seductions of a detached, philosophical rationalism and an equally unhinged, irrational devotion to Julie. Wolmar deploys reason in service to the moral order of the Clarens estate, while St. Preux alternates between unreason (in his moments of uncontrollable passion for Julie) and rationalism (in high society). His struggle to avoid these extremes yields a *Bildungsroman*, contained within *Julie*’s love story,

in which St. Preux tries to remain in command of his reason while avoiding the extremes of rationalism (philosophy) and irrationality (eros).

The challenge St. Preux (and, by extension, all similarly situated truth-seekers) faces is to order himself in accordance with those passions or sentiments that serve truth, rather than those that serve *amour propre*. Julie tells St. Preux to eschew philosophy and consult his “heart,” which, she reminds him, can be defiled by both the “passions” and “idle reason.” (*NH* ii:223; vi:183) *Julie’s* principal narrative emphasizes the threat to virtue posed by the lovers’ passion, which must be subordinated to conscience or the *sentiment intérieur*. But, in the rest of Rousseau’s *corpus*—not excluding portions of *Julie* itself—Rousseau focuses on the threat posed by abstract reason. Julie tells St. Preux to shut out all external influences and follow only his own “inclinations,” by which she does not mean his romantic inclinations toward her—at least not only these inclinations—but rather his broader sense of what virtue demands. Applying this advice to herself leads Julie to the conclusion that she will obey both her father and her lover.

I will never marry you without my father’s consent; but I will never marry another without your consent. I give you my word, it will be sacred come what may, and no human power can force me to betray it. (*NH*, ii:226; vi:186)

Julie pledges her love and faith to St. Preux, but honors her responsibility to her father, and is completely forthright with St. Preux about her decision. In this, she embodies the conscience’s enlightened balance between reason (represented by the authority of the father) and passion (represented by the lover, St. Preux).

At the beginning of Part II of the novel, Rousseau remarks in a footnote that the lovers begin to “rave and wander about.” They have “lost their poor heads.” (*NH*, ii:189; vi:155) We know that, for Rousseau, to speak from the heart is to speak truthfully and authentically, and, in the *Reveries*, Rousseau will recommend abandoning oneself entirely to one’s senses. However, in this footnote, Rousseau suggests that we must remain in control of our passions. St. Preux’s confidant and adviser, Lord Bomston, embodies the alternative to Julie’s and St. Preux’s delirium. While he honors the purity and goodness of St. Preux’s love, he is concerned that it might “occupy . . . part of his faculties,” by which he means what he calls “sublime reason.” (*NH*, ii:193; vi:158) Bomston, though, is not hyper-rational. St. Preux’s ardent love of Julie is not a weakness, in his view, but a “strength put to the wrong use.” (*NH*, ii:193; vi:158) Exerted appropriately, that is, exerted in conjunction with reason, St. Preux’s sentimentalism is a pathway toward wisdom. As Bomston puts it, “the highest reason is only attained through the same power of the soul which gives rise to great passions, and we serve philosophy worthily only with the same ardor that we feel for a mistress.” (*NH*, ii:193; vi:158)²⁸

Sentiment is the inspiration and motivation for the pursuit of truth, while reason functions as an instrument of order. Here, we are introduced to reason's regulative function. Reason must manage the sentiments without overwhelming them. Because morality depends on sentiment, it is imperiled as much by the rationalism of Parisian society, as it is by the irrationalism of St. Preux's unbridled love for Julie. Ideally, St. Preux's love for Julie will redouble his love of virtue, as he strives to prove himself worthy of her love. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is about the human heart, about restraining both the body and the mind in the proper proportion, such that the heart governs.

Reason alone could have made St. Preux a dispassionate admirer of virtue. But without stirring the heart, dispassionate admiration amounts to little more than the idle moralism of the philosophers Rousseau despised: "Cold reason has never achieved anything illustrious, and passions are overcome only by being set against each other." (*NH*, ii:493; vi:405)²⁹ It is here that St. Preux's love for Julie can be an impetus to virtue. St. Preux tells Julie that his love for her (and hers for him) will help to make him useful—a man of virtue as opposed to just an admirer of it. (*NH*, ii:229; vi:188) Love gives St. Preux a reason to be virtuous, just as faith does for the Christian and patriotism does for the citizen (which explains Rousseau's frustration at those intellectuals who would undermine them for their own agendas). Love, like faith and patriotism, makes us want to be virtuous. Only an ardent *love* of virtue can triumph over the inclination toward vice. Theoretical admiration will never be enough. Good passion or sentiment must prevail over destructive passions. St. Preux wants to be virtuous in order to be worthy of Julie's love, which becomes the most philosophically significant aspect of Rousseau's writings on love. A lover's affection, Rousseau argues, is something for which we must make ourselves worthy. If we do not, we defile both ourselves and the ostensible love that we feel for our beloved.

Reason does not govern sentiment; it cannot do so and, when it is deployed in that way, it only obscures the immediately accessible truths necessary to human happiness. To some extent, the reverse is the case: sentiment must drive reason. According to Julie, it is St. Preux's "ardent love" that inspires "elevation of thought" and "justness of mind."³⁰ Virtue prevails for St. Preux even when his alienation is at its depth, his capacity to control his passions at its weakest:

. . . ah, speak to me no more of philosophy! I despise that misleading display consisting in nothing but empty words; that phantom that is nothing but a wisp, that incites us to defy passions from a distance and leaves us like an empty braggart when they get closer. (*NH*, ii:220; vi:181)

Here, St. Preux is at his most despondent, living at a great distance from his beloved, and yet his desire to be worthy of her love enables him to preserve his virtue. It is not reason or philosophy that pulls St. Preux out

of his “craven despair.” (*NH*, ii:220; vi:181) “Chaste love” and “sublime friendship” are what he draws on. (*NH*, ii:220; vi:181) The heart safeguards St. Preux’s virtue while philosophy is just a “blustering bully” that runs away. St. Preux reminds us of Rousseau at his most desperate—his most frustrated and unrequited—but St. Preux handles that frustration much better than Rousseau did, or perhaps he handles it how Rousseau wished he had.

St. Preux points toward a defense of simple reason or sentimental reason, yoked to those sentiments associated with our natural love of existence. His reason, unlike that of those he encounters in society, is self-limiting, as well as a limitation on his passions. It checks both the passions and itself, instructing him to circumscribe both reason (to avoid rationalism) and passion (to avoid irrationality). Most significantly, St. Preux offers an example—perhaps Rousseau’s clearest—of how discursive reason alone cannot lead us to the truth. We are always also in need of a sentimental motive, whether it be love of God, nature, one’s fellows, or, in the case of *Julie*, love of a specific human being.

The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar

The *Profession* contains truths that Rousseau believed had the potential to “make a revolution among men.” (*R*, i:1018; viii:23) Rousseau regarded it as his most important work, because he believed it had the potential to resuscitate morality, which, as he had shown in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, was languishing. Rousseau called the *Profession* the “best and most useful writing” of the eighteenth century. (*LB*, iv:960; ix:46–7) He believed the *Profession* contained within it the power to simultaneously correct the excesses of both Christianity and philosophy. The *Profession* is presented as an alternative to the dogmatism that had come to predominate in philosophy, just as it had previously in Christianity. Reacting against the divine authority that the Jesuits had insisted was absolute, modern philosophers established themselves as an authority “no less absolute than that of their enemies,” while claiming to speak only for reason. (*D*, i:967; i:239) Their new dogma supplanted the incumbent by perfecting its habits. Though the new dogmatists preached tolerance and claimed to be open-minded, Rousseau imagined that their response to a resurgence of true theism would bring about “a philosophical inquisition more wily and no less bloody than the other.” (*D*, i:968; i:239) Here Rousseau felt he could be of use, because the debate between the priests and the *philosophes* had become polarized. Both sides had dug in and were blind to their own prejudices. The *Profession* was an attempt to strip away all prejudices and presuppositions, so that the reader might start from the voice of nature, rather than being constrained by the elaborate apparatuses that both the *philosophes* and the priests had similarly constructed. These bitter rivals were more similar than they realized, and the *Profession* diagnoses exactly how.

i. The Profession in Context

In the *Profession*, Rousseau moves well beyond critique to what can be described as a coherent, and perhaps even a systematic, defense of reason. For a writer who disparaged systematic philosophy, it is perhaps unsurprising that Rousseau presented the *Profession*, not as his own view, but as that of the vicar of Savoy. Elsewhere, Rousseau's remarks on reason are more fragmented, disparaging, and highly contextual. The vicar allows Rousseau a space to outline an *a priori* philosophy, independent of the blistering critique of reason so often associated with Rousseau. By speaking through the vicar, Rousseau also preserves the option of disassociating himself from the vicar's philosophy.

How much of the vicar's view reflects Rousseau's own? That is a difficult if not impossible question to answer. Many commentators cite the *Profession* as a direct representation of Rousseau's views. Outside of the *Profession*, Rousseau endorses the fundamental principles defended in it, and in a letter to Moulton, Rousseau wrote, "the profession of faith of the Savoyard vicar is mine." (CC, 23 December 1761, 1602, ix:342) This remark is situated in a context in which Rousseau expresses the same views he outlined in the *Letter to Voltaire*, regarding his basic need to believe in God and a larger moral order. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau writes that the *Profession* is "approximately" what he believes. (i:1018; viii:22). Nevertheless, there are reasons to believe that the *Profession* does not represent the full complexity of Rousseau's view on questions of faith and reason. First, it is unlikely that Rousseau would have chosen to present his views through a surrogate if they were entirely his own. Second, the vicar expresses views that are somewhat at odds with positions Rousseau staked out elsewhere.³¹ Finally, the vicar lacks Rousseau's ambivalence—he is reflective of Rousseau's spiritual side but lacks his scathing wit; he is Rousseau the dreamer without Rousseau's cynicism. All of this being said, with respect to the role of reason and its relationship to sentiment, the views expressed in the *Profession* are consistent with the views Rousseau elsewhere represents as his own.

Prior to the *Profession*, which is situated in Book IV of *Emile*, Rousseau repeats some of the criticisms first advanced in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*. Reason, Rousseau writes, tends toward abstraction, while philosophical reason fetishizes it, turning it into a requirement of truth. This leads to pithy principles, which sound good but have little practical import. Philosophers describe moral principles, which they do not fulfill: "A philosopher loves the Tartars to be spared having to love his neighbors." (E, iv:249; xiii:164). However, these preliminary passages also point toward the affirmation of reason the vicar will deliver in the *Profession*: "My reasonings are founded less on principles than on facts." (E, iv:348; xiii:246) The type of reasoning Rousseau favors is described most thoroughly and most clearly in the *Profession*. It is a synthesis of empiricism and idealism. It is grounded in immediately sensed facts and organized by transcendental/

theological principles. It is reason driven as much as possible by experience and sentiment.³² Rousseau refused the materialism of Helvétius and d'Holbach, which held that reason is constituted by desire, but he did not go as far as Kant later would in conceiving of reason's operations as entirely self-contained. Indeed, Rousseau worried about the unmooring of reason from the *sentiment intérieur*, which he regarded as essential to the good use of reason. Rousseau's epistemology was nowhere near as systematic as the materialists he criticized or Kant's idealism, which he anticipated. Nevertheless, it is clear that he believed reason, when it is used well, operates neither autonomously nor as a scout for the passions. Reason was, for Rousseau, a regulative faculty that *could* operate either way but *should* follow the guidance of the *sentiment intérieur*, which Rousseau also referred to as "conscience."

In considering this text, it should be kept in mind that the vicar's profession is a profession of *faith*, not of reason or philosophy. The *Profession* describes the need to subordinate reason to faith. Reason *can* serve truth, but only if it is yoked to faith or sentiment, which amounts to approximately the same thing for Rousseau. The vicar describes his profession as the outpouring of "all the sentiments of [his] heart." (E, iv:565; xiii:425) Our commitment to justice is not derived from a reasoned examination of it. The reverse is the case. Reasoned examination reveals the extent to which we are already committed to justice in our hearts. Rousseau makes the point earlier in Book IV:

From this I conclude that it is not true that the precepts of natural law are founded on reason alone. They have a base more solid and sure. Love of men derived from love of self is the principle of human justice. (E, iv:523; xiii:389)

The more basic or fundamental our inspiration, the more reliable it is. This is the essence of Rousseau's teaching on natural goodness. *Amour de soi*, the most elemental of our sentiments, produces a corresponding concern for others. This compassion for others, which Rousseau here calls a "love of men," is the inspiration and motivation for moral action, even if reason is necessary for coordination of moral action. Sentiment and reason work together in the consciousness of just human beings.

In reading the *Profession* (as well as Rousseau's larger *corpus*), we must not presuppose a stark distinction between reason and sentiment, what Kant would later call the noumenal and the phenomenal. The *Profession* is an attempt to chart a course between materialism and rationalism. It rejects the materialist notion that truth originates externally. However, it also takes exception to rationalism's privileging of ideas to facts and its disparaging of faith and the senses. The *Profession* advances an epistemology grounded in sentiment more than reason and guided by facts more than systems or paradigms.

Rousseau grasped the importance of studying the nature of the faculties we use to engage the world: “But who am I? What right have I to judge things, and what determines my judgments? . . . Thus my glance must first be turned toward myself in order to know the instrument I wish to use and how far I can trust its use.” (*E*, iv:570; xiii:429) He understood that the way we engage the world affects the truths that we derive from it. The vicar’s concern was essentially for *how* he should engage the world—which faculties he should draw upon, and how he should draw upon them. He asked himself the question that Kant would later formalize: what are the conditions under which a judgment can be considered valid? Whereas his predecessors and contemporaries generally favored reason as the best guarantor of validity, Rousseau problematized all of our faculties, inquiring into the conditions under which any one of them could be relied upon for guidance. In the *Profession*, the vicar laid out a framework for deriving convictions or making judgments, based on the proper combination of experience, sentiment, faith, *and* reason.

For this reason, among others, Rousseau is widely perceived as fitting only very uneasily into what is now called “the Enlightenment.” His embrace of religion, critique of philosophy, and rejection of progress all contribute to this judgment. However, Rousseau’s view of reason, just like his view of religion and progress, was complex. Rousseau felt persecuted by his readers’ inability or unwillingness to grasp the nuances of his texts. He wrote, for example, “All of my ideas fit together, but I can hardly present them simultaneously,” or “pardon me my paradoxes. When one reflects, they are necessary.” (*SC*, iii:377, iv:151; *E*, iv:323; xiii:226) In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau addressed what he regarded as misreadings of the *Profession*. The clergy, in particular, had taken offense to the *Profession*, which they frequently characterized as atheistic. Rousseau, who regarded himself as a pious man, was typically indignant at the charge. The *Profession*, he maintained, had two goals, corresponding to its two sections. The first section was intended to combat modern materialism, establish the existence of God and the validity of natural religion. (*LB*, iv:996; ix:75) The second part raises doubts about revelation in an attempt to encourage tolerance and discourage dogmatism. The clergy, Rousseau wrote, took offense to the second half without taking note of the first, because they were more concerned with their own cause than they were with God’s. (*LB*, iv:996–7; ix:75)

ii. The Vicar’s Teaching

The source of our “greatest errors” is, according to the vicar, “general and abstract ideas.” (*E*, iv:577; xiii:434) The vicar, therefore, vowed to derive his most essential ideas less from reason than from faith, sentiment, and feeling. As Rousseau advised Sophie in the *Moral Letters*, the vicar accepts those ideas that he senses are right.³³ This sentimental approach to truth-seeking is opposed to philosophical systems, in that it excludes all manner

of systematic thinking, whereby, in Rousseau's view, conclusions are predetermined by the chosen philosophical system. Contemporary academics are generally lauded for developing "research programs" or "frameworks"—in short, for deriving judgments from a system. For Rousseau, this turns the pursuit of truth on its head. The truths essential to human happiness are simple or pure and are almost always obscured by philosophical sophification.³⁴ Moreover, these truths are proximal, even parochial, though they are also universal. When the vicar encourages his acolyte to return to the "religion of [his] father," he is counseling a return to the universal human spirit. The vicar's method is spiritual but secular; it is rigorously autonomous but also universal. Theology and philosophy merge in the *Profession* as autonomous inquiry leads first and foremost to the universal truths of God's existence and goodness.

Although the vicar ostensibly offers a profession of *faith* rather than an excursus on reason, the *Profession* nevertheless yields important insights into the role of reason in the process of truthseeking. The vicar insists that he is not a philosopher and has no aspirations to be one; philosophy, the vicar clearly believes, will not move him any closer to the truth. Neither is the vicar interested in argument, though he does say that reason is the faculty that will enable him to share his insights and his audience to understand them. (*E*, iv:565–6; xiii:425) Reason's role will be to explain details, organize facts, and account for anomalies and exceptions.

At the outset of the *Profession*, the vicar announces that he will reason "in the simplicity of [his] heart." (*E*, iv:566; xiii:425) From Rousseau's other writings, we know that reason, if it is to serve truth, must remain highly circumscribed, proceeding only from clearly established facts and toward heartfelt conclusions. Reason should not be deployed either to establish values or to deconstruct them. The vicar's chastened view of reason's function departs from eighteenth-century conventions in at least two ways. First, as noted above, Rousseau believed that European intellectuals had made excessive use of reason, at the expense of faith and sentiment. Second, he believed that reason led more often than not toward corruption. Rousseau wanted, therefore, first, to limit the scope of rational inquiry to those things that are absolutely necessary, and, second, to ensure the integrity of reason in those areas where it is necessary. So, like his great admirer, Immanuel Kant, Rousseau's critique of reason was motivated by a desire to salvage it.

In Rousseau's mind, the decision to instruct, speak publicly, or publish writings must be justified; to *prend la parole* (begin to speak) is to assume a moral responsibility measured by the contribution one makes to human happiness.³⁵ The speech the vicar gives is justified in his mind (and Rousseau's no doubt) because he perceives it to be the source of his happiness and a possible source of happiness for all human beings. Indeed, the vicar clarifies early on that his faith emerges not from an intellectually compelling theology but rather from an abject need to believe. Having at an earlier stage of his life fallen into unbelief, the vicar relates, his faith developed in the

most reliable way—in response to a desperate need: “Although I have often experienced greater evils, I have never led a life so constantly disagreeable as during those times of perplexity and anxiety, when I ceaselessly wandered from doubt to doubt.” (*E*, iv:567; xiii:427) Skepticism, the vicar maintains, is incompatible with happiness, so much so that he doubts the very existence of skeptical philosophers, who would have to be the “unhappiest of men.” (*E*, iv:568; xiii:427) Doubt is an unstable state, in which the mind will not linger unless forced to remain there by a philosophical system. Eventually, we will fall into one prejudice or another, so as not to remain in “too violent a state for the human mind.” (*E*, iv:568; xiii:427) Philosophers’ preference for doubt is incompatible with the heart’s natural inclination to affirm the goodness of existence. This personal, psychological need to believe was, for Rousseau, the most reliable principle of philosophical justification, even if most philosophers would not regard it as a philosophical principle at all.

The vicar’s goal was to avoid both dogmatism and relativism, to avoid prejudice while preserving his convictions. Prejudice, it turns out, is not the opposite of relativism but its cousin. If all truth is relativized, all intellectual commitments will become prejudices. Worse yet, in a relativistic era, no one is responsible for the ideas they propagate. We owe nothing to anyone or anything and are left free to pursue *amour propre*. The *Profession* can be read as an ethics of philosophical responsibility. The challenge is to avoid dogmatism without succumbing to doubt, to be open to nature’s voice *and* at the same time be able to develop convictions. The vicar attempts this by drawing conclusions only in cases where he “cannot refuse his consent” and by avoiding even the consideration of questions that lead to “nothing useful for practice.” (*E*, iv:570; xiii:429)

The approach is Cartesian at the outset, though the conclusion differs substantially. Rather than “I think, therefore I am,” the vicar’s formula might be described as, “I sense, therefore I am.” The vicar’s first conclusion is that he exists and has senses. (*E*, iv:571; xiii:430) One of these is the sentiment of existence, the nature of which the vicar is determined to understand. In particular, he wants to understand how the sentiment of existence relates to his other senses. He determines that his sensations are internal, while their cause is external. This is useful knowledge, because it lays the groundwork for a creator who redeems human life.

Truth, the vicar concludes, is immediate and available to us through our senses. We do not create it, we access it, and we do that best when we put as little as possible of ourselves into the judgments we make. Truth is better sensed than thought; we ought not mediate our communion with truth (nature). This helps to explain why Rousseau was skeptical about language’s capacity to communicate truth. Both reason and language—the faculties we employ to communicate truth—are heavily mediated and, therefore, insufficient to the task. What *can* reason tell us?—that we should listen to our instincts more than our reason.³⁶ Philosophers fail to grasp this principle, because their mode of inquiry itself prejudices them against it. Prejudice determines

not only the outcome of philosophical inquiry but also the subjects deemed worthy of investigation. Instinct is not investigated at all by philosophers because, according to the vicar, they lack the tools to understand it. Because systematic philosophy cannot grasp instinct, it deems it nothing more than a habit. (*E*, iv:595; xiii:449) If instinct is just a habit, the vicar asks, why is it that “every dog in the world does pretty nearly the same thing in the same situation?” (*E*, iv:595; xiii:449) Our instinct, the vicar argues, is the manifestation of nature’s constant directive, while reason is protean and fickle.

The vicar does endorse something like a law of nature,³⁷ but whereas philosophers had generally characterized the law of nature as a property of reason or as accessible by reason, the vicar describes it as inscribed in the heart more than the mind. Grasping the essential principles of morality and justice does not require what the vicar describes as “metaphysical discussions which are out of my reach and yours, and which, at bottom, lead to nothing.” (*E*, iv:599; xiii:452–3) The vicar instead urges his student “not to philosophize” but to “consult [his] heart.” (*E*, iv:599; xiii:452–3) To consult the heart is simply to “distinguish our acquired ideas from natural sentiments.” (*E*, iv:599; xiii:453) It is here that reason can make its contribution, not in deriving truth, but in clearing away those “acquired ideas” that preclude us from grasping the immediate truths made available to us through our senses. This is the meaning of Rousseau’s assertion that education must be a negative process. The vicar’s claim is not exactly that philosophical inquiry leads nowhere; it is rather that these philosophical inquiries are beyond him and, he suggests, are almost certainly beyond us too. There may exist a few individuals capable of accessing the truths that pertain to happiness through the exercise of reason, and, if so, they should count themselves lucky. But, in most cases, reason is more likely to mystify than to enlighten.

After the first part of the *Profession*, Rousseau tells us that both the vicar and his student were moved—not convinced, but moved. (*E*, iv:606; xiii:458) When the heart is moved, it is as though nature herself is speaking. Often, we are moved in spite of ourselves, caught off guard. At times, we might become angry at ourselves for being moved by something our intellect regards as common or hackneyed. Philosophers, in this case, tend to follow their intellect and repress sentiment. The vicar makes the radical claim that, forced to make this choice, we should repress the intellect and listen to sentiment. Do not be ashamed, he counsels, of that which is simple, common, and shared; after all, those are the characteristics of truth as well. Truth is basic and primal; it is sensed more than it is theorized. As he concludes his remarks, the vicar translates his teaching into concrete advice:

Go back to your own country, return to the religion of your fathers, follow it in the sincerity of your heart, and never leave it again. It is very simple and very holy. (*E*, iv:631; xiii:478)

This echoes the advice given by Rousseau in the first *Discourse* and reflects the ethics of truth Rousseau claimed to practice himself. When forced to

choose between his sentiment and what he called the “truths raised in objection,” Rousseau vowed that he would make sentiment the ultimate arbiter—above his reason, even Scripture, because sentiment is the voice of God. (O, iii:35; ii:37) In a certain sense, the question was moot for Rousseau, because, as he put it, “my reason chooses the feeling the heart prefers.” (D, i:879; i:170). Those who argue the reverse do so to elevate themselves, but, Rousseau insisted, they are deluded (D, i:879; i:170).³⁸

Rousseau conceded that philosophy could be useful if it could somehow exclude the passions. The truths apprehended would be “more limited but more certain.” (LB, iv:968; ix:53) However, since the passions always influence, even determine, our thinking, philosophical approaches to truth generally fail. Now, the fact that the passions influence reason is not inherently bad in the least, so long as we listen to the right passions or sentiments. If we do, we will easily discern the few simple truths that make for human happiness—precisely the same few truths that reason would reveal if the passions could somehow be silenced. Since the latter is probably impossible, we are better off following our heart from the outset.

The best way to follow the heart is to accept only those arguments that we ourselves know to be true, either through experience or through faith. The truthseeker must come to her own conclusions through immersion in her environment and exposure to a diversity of experiences. Emile, for example, will be governed by nothing other than his own judgment, which will lead him to the beliefs that contribute most to his happiness. He will reject the dogma that there is but one single expression of faith preferred by God, and yet he will nonetheless embrace fervently whichever sect suits him best. The vicar himself admits to an uncertainty, with regard to his profession of faith. His suggestion is that we must not be too sure of ourselves, but neither should we be indecisive. “Be sincere with yourself. Make your own those of my sentiments which have persuaded you. Reject the rest.” (E, iv:630; xiii:478) We must be open but not only open; we must be open to nature and the inner voice but closed to harmful influences. We must remain open-minded and yet we must make judgments.

As always in Rousseau’s work, the key for the vicar is that reason be circumscribed: we must exclude the “authority of men” and the “prejudices of the country in which one was born.” (E, iv:635; xiii:481–2) If we are able to do this, the vicar indicates that we will end up at “natural religion,” very much like the natural religion Rousseau defended in the *Social Contract*. This is another principle of the vicar’s philosophy: reason, properly exercised, leads us to God. Philosophy and theology merge when the dogmatic, intolerant aspects of each are stripped away. Natural religion captures Rousseau’s most basic philosophical insight: “If ever peace could be established where interest, pride and opinionation now reign, thereby the dissensions of the priests and philosophers would finally end.” (LDA, v:11; x:258)

In the *Profession*, God’s will reveals itself within the soul of each person, and God becomes synonymous with the inner voice that speaks to every person. For the Church, this was insufficiently faithful, insufficiently doctrinal;

for philosophers it was no doubt too theological. But for Rousseau, there was no single path to truth. Truth can be accessed from various places, and it is pointless to argue over how we get there; it is like “forcing someone else to see through your eyes.” (*LM*, iii:727; ix:166) Rousseau does not ridicule or doubt the sincerity of the faithful, but he insists that they accept their faith as their own and resist the temptation to impose it on others. There are many paths to truth as there are individuals.

By his turn of mind, one is struck only by one type of proof, the other is struck only by a very different kind. All can indeed agree sometimes on the same things, but it is very rare that they agree for the same reasons. (*LM*, iii:166; ix:166)

God has spoken variously in revealing his doctrine. A few may hear the full spectrum of these voices, and of them we can say that they are fortunate. Most people will hear only a few, but they should not be pitied for they will arrive at truth just as certainly as those whose minds are more expansive.

The Moral Letters

Judith Shklar read the *Moral Letters* as Rousseau’s skeptical answer to the vicar’s optimism. She regarded them as reflective of Rousseau’s personal approach to epistemological questions, which she contrasted with the vicar’s far more sanguine approach.³⁹ In my view, the differences Shklar emphasized are more stylistic than substantive. The *Moral Letters* are best understood not as a departure from the *Profession* but as an extension of its substantive argument, though the letters are written in a more severe tone, reflective of Rousseau’s typical epistolary voice. In fact, Rousseau’s message to Sophie d’Houdetot is the vicar’s message to Emile: “This is my entire philosophy and, I believe, the entire art of being happy that is feasible to man.” (*ML*, iv:1105; xii:193) Sophie, like Emile, is advised to choose those ideas that contribute to her happiness, for those are the only ideas worthy of contemplation.

The *Moral Letters* were written from late 1757 to 1758 when Rousseau almost certainly was contemplating the argument of *Emile*, which itself was published in 1762. These letters can certainly be approached as an extension of the argument presented in the *Profession* and *Julie*.⁴⁰ They situate the vicar’s experience-based, sentiment-governed reason in an epistolary context, influenced to be sure by the affection Rousseau felt for Sophie d’Houdetot, but substantively consistent with the conception of reason that Rousseau was developing at this stage of his life.

Rousseau began the *Letters* as the vicar began the *Profession*—with biographical details intended to demonstrate the goodness of his intentions. His first order of business was to establish his credentials, not as a philosopher, of course, but as a person of integrity. Rousseau composed the *Moral*

Letters because Sophie had asked for the rules of morality, presumably because she respected Rousseau's unique intellect. His response, however, was only partly intellectual. As usual, he wrote first and foremost from an ethical or moral perspective. Rousseau writes, in the first letter, not about his unique knowledge or intellect but instead about his unique character. Even to a dear friend who one might think would know better, Rousseau spends most of the first letter establishing that he did not have a "the soul of a wicked man." (ML, iv:1081; xii:175)

After establishing the goodness of his intentions, Rousseau goes on to discuss Sophie's character. He writes in the first letter as though Sophie were, in many ways, more of an expert on morality than he was himself. Sophie already loves morality, and so, rather than offer her a lesson, Rousseau takes it upon himself to instead deliver her an "homage." (ML, iv:1082; xii:175) He brings his intellect to bear in order to verbalize for Sophie the morality that she already grasps intuitively.⁴¹ Rousseau declares that he will not teach Sophie either how to make arguments or how to refute them. There is no utility in that. As long as she senses that he is right, Rousseau says he will not worry about proving it. And he suggests that Sophie approach morality in the same way: "I ask you only to interrogate your heart. Do not listen to my voice, oh Sophie, except to the extent that you feel it confirmed by its voice." (ML, iv:1083; xii: 177) Rousseau tells Sophie that he will not appeal to her reason but instead to her heart, and he will, likewise, share only those ideas that hold sway over *his* heart. This way, Rousseau thinks, the two will overcome the opacity of language, which makes it speak differently to each person. Reason varies, but the heart is constant. Rousseau tries to speak to that part of us that is essential, basic, and primordial. He tries to elicit our natural love of goodness and the love of morality that grows out of it in virtuous societies.

The *Moral Letters* add some nuance to Rousseau's understanding of reason, in particular its relationship to sentiment. Measured by our capacity for reason, Rousseau writes, we are minuscule, but, measured by our sentiments, we are great. Reason is perhaps necessary to direct and manage sentiment, but it is primarily sentiment that produces virtue. (ML, iv:196–7; xii:1110) This was a lonely idea to hold in the middle of Enlightenment Europe, where reason was ascendant. In the *Moral Letters*, Rousseau referred to the philosophical reason favored by his contemporaries as the "art of reasoning," an art Rousseau disparaged despite his own aptitude for it. The "art of reasoning" has nothing to do with reason, Rousseau argued, but is rather the abuse of it. Reason has a very specific and very circumscribed function in Rousseau's system. As he puts it here, "Reason is the faculty of ordering all the faculties of our soul suitably to the nature of things and their relationship to us." (ML, iv:1090; iv:182) Reason exists for this purpose and for this purpose alone. Unfortunately, in order for it to have the capacity to perform this function, it necessarily has the capacity to do other things as well. Consequently, virtue requires that we exercise restraint in our use of reason, just as we must with regard to our other faculties.

At the beginning of the third letter, Rousseau explains in some detail exactly how he understands philosophers' method of inquiry. Philosophers are "children," he writes, meaning that they are self-absorbed and imagine themselves and their ideas to be the center of the universe. (*ML*, iv:189; xii:1099) A philosopher, like a child, has trouble accepting limits. Unable to comprehend basic objects, philosophers make fantastical images that become general truths for our limited intellect. Each philosopher reasons this way, producing her own idiosyncratic set of truths, which she takes to be universal, in spite of the fact that no two are alike or in conformity. This explains why intellectual discourse is a confounding "babble." (*ML*, iv:1092; xii:183). Nature is universal but philosophy tends toward particularity and so is not a reliable path toward grasping the truths of nature and natural goodness. Truth, for Rousseau, is singular, while the pathways to it are diverse. Philosophers, Rousseau contends, fail to appreciate both the singularity of truth and the diversity of pathways to it. Here, Rousseau criticizes philosophers for dogmatism and parochialism, precisely that which they themselves repudiate:

Each sect is the only one that has found the truth. Each book exclusively contains the precepts of wisdom, each author is the only one who teaches us what is good. One proves to us that there is no body at all, another that there are no souls at all, another that the soul has no relation to the body, another that man is a beast, another that God is a mirror. (*ML*, iv:1089; xii:181)

It is no accident that Rousseau refers to philosophical "sects." Rousseau's complaints are common pantheistic or deistic criticisms of religious orthodoxy. Philosophers privilege their systematic, rationalistic approach to truth, closing their minds to far superior modes of engaging the world. Reason is simply not capacious enough to comprehend the objects toward which it is deployed: "substance, soul, body, eternity, movement, liberty, necessity, contingency." (*ML*, iv:1096; xii:186–7) Though these words are frequently employed, Rousseau tells Sophie that no one has ever understood them.

Philosophers spend their time inventing new philosophical problems, when they should be working to recover the very basic "language of nature," which Rousseau believes "we have all forgotten." (*ML*, iv:1112; xii:198) The language of nature is there to be recovered; it persists, Rousseau believed, through all our errors. (*D*, i:972; i:242) We can recover it if we are willing to do all that we must to remember, which is to say that we must stop the process of alienation and "return into ourselves." (*ML*, xii:199; iv:1113) Society and philosophy erect walls between us and our nature and so exacerbate our alienation. Philosophical reason is aggressive, insisting that everything it confronts be assimilated, while sentiment or the inner voice is open, tolerant, and accepting. It leads to true understanding. Rousseau considered himself unique, but, in his view, it was not his intellect that

distinguished him from other people; it was rather his sensitivity: “Nature gave me the most sensitive soul . . . and I believe I can say . . . that nothing human is alien to me.” (*ML*, iv:1102; xii:191) It was Rousseau’s sensitivity that accounted for the strength of his moral conscience and justified what would otherwise have to be considered the arrogance of speaking of morality to the virtuous Sophie d’Houdetot.⁴²

Rousseau seems to believe that Sophie, like St. Preux, can succeed where he himself could not. Rousseau failed to be moral himself, but Sophie’s request makes him realize that he has a chance to redeem what he calls the “uselessness of [his] entire life.” (*ML*, iv:1084; xii:177) If he can inspire a love of virtue in Sophie, he will have compensated for his wasted youth. Philosophers had sterilized virtue by regarding it always and only as an intellectual problem—as something to be understood—and the real foundation of virtue had been neglected as a result. Rousseau’s goal, both in his advice to Sophie and in his broader system, was to convince his readers that virtue is felt or sensed more than it is deduced or conceptualized.

Rousseau was no skeptic. He attacked skepticism savagely on many occasions, but, even so, Rousseau often described the limitations of language and of reason. The *Moral Letters* in particular have a skeptical tone. “We don’t know anything,” Rousseau writes at the beginning of the third letter. How is it possible that Rousseau, who had committed himself to refuting skepticism, could make this claim? We know nothing, Rousseau claimed, not because knowledge is impossible, but because we have not properly consecrated ourselves to it. Rousseau’s skepticism was part of an ethics of truthseeking, not a metaphysical claim about the ultimate capacity of human beings to grasp the basic truths of human happiness. This is skepticism, but it is skepticism consistent with the vicar’s (and Rousseau’s) faith in the goodness of existence and of moral virtue. Basic truths are available to us, and that is really all that matters; even if everything else were beyond our capacity, we would still have all we need to be happy. (*DAS*, iii:15; ii:12) Fetishizing more sophisticated knowledge only obscures the essential truth of natural goodness and, therefore, leaves us even less auspiciously positioned with regard to truth than we would have been had we not made use of reason at all and stuck to faith, sentiment, and love of the *patrie*.

Reveries of the Solitary Walker

In the twenty-year interval between the *Profession* and the *Reveries*, Rousseau became progressively more and more alienated from the intellectuals who dominated European cultural life. While it is unclear whether Rousseau maintained a belief in reason’s capacity to serve truth, it is quite clear that Rousseau had given up on reason as a viable pathway to truth for himself. He turned unambiguously toward faith and sentiment in his late writings. This can be seen even in the *Government of Poland* (1772), which

appropriates quite a bit from the *Social Contract* (1762) but discards the earlier text's emphasis on reason. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau becomes even more emphatic about the importance of a pure heart. Here, Rousseau decides it is unnecessary to refute the arguments made against him.⁴³

The first mention of reason in the *Reveries* comes in Walk Three, in the context of a critique of philosophers, who, in Rousseau's view, remained detached from their object of study: "... they studied the universe in order to know how it was ordered, just as they would have studied some machine they might have perceived through pure curiosity." (*R*, i:1012–1013; viii:18) While this detached perspective probably sounds about right to most of us today, for Rousseau, it invalidated the ideas that flowed from it. While we tend to see the posture of detachment as dispassionate and, therefore, trustworthy, Rousseau saw it as self-interested, corrupt, and, in the end, impossible. We should not strive to reason in the silence of prejudices, partly because there is no such thing, but also because the right prejudices are essential to the integrity of reason.

Reason, in the third walk, is associated with philosophy and contrasted with the heart, a word that appears nineteen times in the third walk alone and that is used interchangeably with "sentiment" in Rousseau's *corpus*. Here, Rousseau has given up on a reasoned response to his critics. After having tried everything he could think of to refute the charges arrayed against him—essays, letters, poetry, a novel, a moral treatise, writings on faith and religion, an opera, and autobiography—Rousseau decided that he could not make plain his natural goodness. Either he was not up to the task or his contemporaries were not in a position to listen. Even Rousseau himself was not sure what to think, unable to convince himself that he had adequately refuted the claims advanced by his critics. He blamed himself for this, not because he failed to come up with an adequate response, but because he attempted to respond at all. The better reaction would have been to consider the possibility that there may be no answer to their claims, something that Rousseau depicts himself as being able to appreciate only at this time in his life. Now, only at this late stage, is Rousseau able to say that he "determined for [his] whole life" to hold fast to his convictions. (*R*, i:1017; viii:22)

Unable to reason his way to the answers he sought, Rousseau vowed instead to feel his way there. While reason provided no definitive response to the skeptical arguments of Rousseau's contemporaries, his heart gave him the assurance he desired. Most philosophers would shudder at such a defense of one's convictions, but Rousseau was quite happy to admit that the "prejudices of childhood and the secret wishes of my heart made the scale lean to the side the most consoling for me." (*R*, i:1017; viii:22) This admission did not detract from Rousseau's beliefs, in his view, because all ideas are motivated by prejudice, and a prejudice in favor of belief is as defensible as any. So, Rousseau simply decided that he would not be "tossed about eternally by the sophisms of better speakers than I am." (*R*, i:1016; viii:21)

Rousseau here describes philosophical argument as self-interested and agenda-driven. Philosophers advanced theories with the intention of affecting others, while Rousseau sought a philosophy for himself. Indeed, he believed that a personal, urgent necessity was the only justification for philosophy. Rousseau insisted that he had not undertaken one study that, “I could not just as well have undertaken alone on a desert island to which I might have been confined for the rest of my days.” (R, i:1013; viii:18) Philosophy is here associated with worldly success. Philosophy also seems to be attractive for those without convictions. Rousseau’s own philosophy of the soul is different, a product of his upbringing: “principles and maxims—others would say prejudices—which have never completely deserted me.” (R, i:1013; viii:49) An understanding of the origin of Rousseau’s philosophy of the soul ought to improve our disposition toward it, in Rousseau’s view, even if, for most modern thinkers, an admission like this would be devastating.

In the midst of this critique of philosophy, Rousseau inserts an account of his life with Madame de Warens. The function of this biographical passage appears to be to establish Rousseau’s credentials as a wholly inward-looking man. He wants to distinguish himself from the philosophers he had warned us against. (R, i:1015–1016; viii:21) Whereas his contemporaries were motivated by *amour propre*, Rousseau claimed to be indifferent to the opinion of others: “Thus, everything conspired to detach my affections from this world.” (R, i:1014; viii:19) Rousseau claimed to place little stock in those things that are external, a posture that had allowed him to preserve his “good faith” in the face of “metaphysical quibbles and subtleties” directed at him by what he referred to as “our philosophers.” (R, i:1018; viii:22–23) Though he could not always resolve the difficulties and puzzles about which these philosophers had so often “battered [his] ears,” Rousseau nevertheless refused to budge from the decision he had made “once and for all” to believe in the possibility of belief. (R, i:1018; viii:22) This conviction seems to be the principle Rousseau was most interested in preserving at this stage of his life.

Rousseau wondered how he had managed to remain steadfast in his beliefs when so many of his contemporaries saw nothing but “errors and prejudices” and when there were what he himself called “insurmountable difficulties” associated with his core beliefs. (R, i:1020; viii:24) “Is it sufficient that they suit me?,” he wondered. (R, i:1020; viii:24) Rousseau calls these moments of doubt “crises” which slowed as he aged, becoming only “flickers of anxiety.” These moments were overcome not through reason but by running away from reason. Doubt is the result of overvaluing reason, of fetishizing philosophy as the only legitimate path toward truth. The solution is, then, to put philosophy in its place—to demote or subordinate it. In the *Dialogues*, the Rousseau character describes Jean-Jacques as preferring to be governed by a “cheerful imagination rather than to govern his head by reason.” (D, i:865; i:159) Wisdom is born of passivity; it is, in a certain sense, easy, much to the dismay of philosophers. Wisdom is available to

those who are willing to listen, to follow the voice of nature and live in accordance with it. Modern culture has made wisdom difficult by obscuring so thoroughly its source. The worthiest use of reason—the single best use—is to “annihilate it before [God].” (*LB*, iv:959; ix:46)⁴⁴ Reverie becomes a way of doing just this, so that God’s goodness can fill that newly created space, and one can *sense* the truth, as opposed to theorizing it. Our sophistries, of which we are so proud, are just so many barriers to true understanding. Reverie abstains from reason and all the other constraints on consciousness so that sentiments are felt as intimately as possible. For all of its many splendors and in spite of its capacity to enlighten, abstract reason has done humanity more harm than good.

Conventional wisdom turns out to be exactly wrong, Rousseau held, in its assumption that our sentiments and inclinations are confused or unreliable. Our essential sentiments and inclinations are pure; the harmful passions feared by philosophers are the consequence not of sentiments themselves but of their rationalization. It was in reverie, Rousseau came to believe, that truthseekers could most reliably put themselves in touch with the sentiment pur de l’existence. What the citizen experienced as love of the patrie, and St. Preux experienced as a love for Julie, the solitary walker could experience as a universal love of existence, both physical and spiritual.

Rousseau attributed his ability to discern truths that remained opaque to most to his willingness to consult his heart rather than his mind. While philosophers have generally trusted reason to control sentiment, for Rousseau, it was the rationalization of sentiment that was the source of corruption, not sentiment itself. The “method of generalizing and abstracting,” Rousseau wrote in a 1761 letter, “is very suspect to me, because it is too little proportioned to our faculties.” (*CC*, to Dom Leger-Marie Deschamps, 8 May 1761, 1407, viii:320–1) If our capacity for reason were robust enough to exclude the passions, philosophical methods could theoretically be useful. However, because the passions always influence, even determine, our thinking, philosophical approaches to truth generally fail. “The error of moralists is to take man as reasonable. We are rather sensing,” Rousseau wrote in a fragment on politics. (*OC*, iii:554) In both *Julie* and the *Dialogues*, Rousseau has characters insist that reason alone is empty and that the passions are conquered only by opposing one to another.⁴⁵

The task for those seeking truth is not to subordinate the passions to reason but rather to subordinate the harmful passions to the useful ones. This gives us our best chance of arriving at the truths essential to human happiness and is certainly preferable to more austere injunctions to control or suppress the passions. What remains is to determine how best to elicit the useful passions or sentiments that Rousseau associated with original goodness. Reverie, Rousseau came to believe, offered the clearest, most direct pathway to the heart and its *sentiment intérieur*.

Wisdom comes first in accepting the limits of reason. Rousseau continues to insist in the *Reveries*, as he did in the *Moral Letters*, that human beings

are not fully capable of grasping “eternal truths.” These answers, Rousseau tells us, were “beyond [his] reach” and “perhaps beyond that of the human mind.” (R, i:1022; viii:26)⁴⁶ We must limit ourselves to that which the heart and reason can grasp. The “and” is critical. It must be both. If the heart is left out of it, our limitations will lead us to conclusions inimical to truth. The teaching of the *philosophes* may stand the test of reason, but it fails the judgment of the heart. As Rousseau wrote in the *Letter to D'Alembert*, the mind should listen to reason and the heart to nature; we might add that for Rousseau, once this is done, the mind should listen to the heart as well. (LDA, v:74; x:311)

Rousseau charged philosophy with both dogmatism and skepticism. He claimed that philosophers believed both too strongly and not strongly enough. They were dogmatic, he asserted, in their denial of everything human beings hold sacred. They ruthlessly attacked established beliefs and then were yet more stubborn in defense the ideas they claimed to have authored. Rousseau’s critique of philosophy culminated in a unique account of open-mindedness. To be open-minded was, for Rousseau, to have convictions without being “dogmatic” about them; it was, in other words, to choose one’s convictions with “all the maturity of judgment one can put into it.” (R, i:1018; viii:22) To be closed-minded was, by contrast, to insist dogmatically that no conclusions are possible. Rousseau was ambivalent toward reason, because he believed that it tended too often toward the twin pathologies of skepticism and dogmatism.

IV. A Rousseauian Ethics of Reason

It is very common to regard rhetoric as a double-edged sword—a powerful tool that can move its target toward virtue and justice when deployed nobly but a tool that can be deployed equally effectively to sway its targets toward vice and injustice. The same dynamic that makes rhetoric such a potentially powerful force for good makes it a potentially dangerous force for ill when it is not deployed with the proper intentions. While this is not a controversial characterization of rhetoric, it certainly would be were it to be applied to reason. But that is precisely what Rousseau does. He suggests that we conceive of reason as possessing advantages and drawbacks akin to those present in rhetoric. Like rhetoric, reason is an incredibly powerful tool, one that can be equally effectively deployed toward ill or good.⁴⁷ And since we are always already good by nature for Rousseau, the decision to deploy these instruments is fraught with risk.

Just as civilized men and women had become alienated from the immediate happiness of the savage, so too had modern philosophers become alienated from the unmediated truths described by ancient philosophers. Just as civilized men and women suffer under the bourgeois social contract described in the second *Discourse*, so too are modern philosophers mystified by skepticism and *amour propre*. Human beings, Rousseau famously argued in his political theory, must be transformed by a new

social contract, such that *amour propre* is generalized and citizens act for themselves, in conjunction with their compatriots, rather than for themselves, at the expense of others. So too must philosophy be transformed, so that *amour propre* is generalized, and books are written for the benefit of oneself, as a human being in conjunction with others, rather than for oneself, at the expense of others. This is the *only* philosophical way forward, if one insists on following a philosophical path, which is by no means the only path and certainly not the best one. Nonetheless, there is a “genuine philosophy,” introduced at the end of the first *Discourse* and developed in the *Profession*. This genuine philosophy will be circumscribed, activated only in response to an urgent, personal necessity; it will reason from experience rather than a general framework or system; and it will be yoked tightly to sentiment.

As we have seen, there are many places in the *corpus* where Rousseau seems to be warning the reader off of reason altogether. However, as we have also seen, there are places where Rousseau shifts from his standard mode of vilification to a more sober account of the insights made available by reason. Rousseau frequently discusses reason in order to castigate rationalism, but he acknowledges the utility of reason, so long as it is properly circumscribed. Reason is less reliable than sentiment but preferable to public opinion (in the context of modern corruption); it can be understood as a midway point along the path to modern corruption, a point between the savage’s unmediated love of existence and the civilized individual’s subordination of everything to what Rousseau refers to in the *Letter to d’Alembert* as “taste.” Once taste governs, all is lost, but reason can be good or bad depending how circumscribed it is and how closely it is yoked to sentiment. Rousseau praises reason in the *Letter to D’Alembert*, in the context of comparing it to taste, which becomes the criterion for judgment in societies with a theatre. (*LDA*, v:108; x:338–9)

The first principle of Rousseau’s philosophy of the soul is that reason should be deployed modestly. Enlightenment is possible through reason, only when “reason (*les lumières*) is very limited”—limited, Rousseau indicates, to those things that are related closely, directly and intimately to our “true needs.” (*Political Fragment*, OC, iii:477) Once we begin to expand the objects of our interest, we become “much more of a reasoner and much less reasonable.” (*Political Fragment*, OC, iii:478) To be reasonable, then, is to dramatically limit the scope of reason.

The vicar claims to have learned nothing useful from his study of philosophy, except that philosophy is not to be consulted for anything useful. He also learned to concern himself only with “things it was important for [him] to know.” (*E*, iv:569; xiii:428) Rousseau wants to accept only those ideas that he knows to be true without qualification or ulterior purpose. In this sense, he was influenced by Descartes’ method of doubt and by Fénelon’s self-effacing devotion. Having given up on philosophy, the vicar turns to his “inner light,” which may not lead him to truth but will at least avoid many

sources of error, and, most importantly, as he himself puts it, “I will deprave myself less in following my own illusions than in yielding to their lies.” (*E*, iv:569; xiii:428)

Genuine philosophy requires that one be circumscribed with respect to the questions one poses and the answers one pursues. That is, the genuine philosopher will limit herself to questions pertaining to the truths essential to human happiness. Genuine philosophy, however, also requires that one be ecumenical with respect to the pathways by which these essential truths might be accessed. The problem with contemporary philosophers, Rousseau believed, was that they failed on both counts. They were dogmatic where they should be ecumenical and skeptical where they should display conviction. They were dogmatic with respect to those things they should question (the exclusivity of particular pathways to truth) and skeptical where they should be sure-footed (with respect to the availability of the truths essential to human happiness). Genuine philosophy will be circumscribed, in that it will be consecrated to virtue and virtue alone, but it will be expansive, in that it will be open to all pathways to virtue. Genuine philosophers are interested in everything that teaches human beings how to act, but they are interested *only* in those things.

Genuine philosophy requires an expansive mind, open not only to argument, but, even more, to sentiment. Just as in reverie, our responsibility when reasoning is to limit ourselves so that nature may speak: “If I have stated my sentiment . . . , I have stated my reasons for it at the same time.” (*SP*, iii:656; xi:108) Rousseau believed that this protected him against the chief defect of reason—its tendency to inauthenticity. By connecting his reason to his sentiment, Rousseau makes sure that his reason is his own and not a reflection of the opinion of others. Reason has tremendous power but is not good in and of itself. While fears that reason could be deployed toward corrupt ends date to the beginning of philosophy, Rousseau was unique in arguing that reason *itself* could be a source of corruption. Whereas for Plato (and later for Kant), reason was the solution to the problem of moral corruption, for Rousseau, reason could itself be a *cause* of corruption. Reason’s role in moral integrity was, first and foremost, a self-limiting one, in which sentiment and faith were given prominence.

There are several philosophical figures in Rousseau’s writings. It might go too far to call them philosophers, but they are clearly reasoning people—individuals who consult reason for moral guidance. The most obvious is Socrates, the sole named exception to Rousseau’s critique of philosophy in the first *Discourse*. But the vicar, Wolmar, the Abbé Saint-Pierre, and Bomston are also good examples. These men were praised by Rousseau for their simplicity—a virtue toward which Rousseau’s contemporaries were dismissive, if not hostile. Rousseau described the Abbé’s simplicity, for example, as the only possible remedy for the elaborate, unnecessary resentments nations have created. (*SP*, iii:590; xi:49) Philosophy is not inherently necessary to human happiness, but we have made it necessary by alienating

ourselves from nature's immediate truths. We now need philosophy to see what was once immediately apparent to the savage. (*DI*, iii:144; iii:28)

Rousseau's account of the Abbé's virtues provides us with a summary of Rousseau's "genuine philosophy."

He had little warmth and his virtues were rather the work of his reason than of his character: but in his soul he had all the simplicity that could facilitate in him the practice of a gentle and humane Philosophy, and, at the same time all the firmness necessary to make himself constantly adhere to the maxims he had constructed for himself. (*SP*, iii.657; xi:109)

The Abbé reasoned simply and with an open mind, about the right things, and toward the right end, without ever doubting his most essential principles. First, the question the Abbé deploys philosophy for is the "most worthy of occupying a good man"—perpetual peace—so it clearly meets the requirement of practicality. (*SP*, iii:591; xi:53) In his writings on reason, Rousseau is adamant about the need to monitor that for which reason is deployed. This matters to him more than the substance or form of a philosophical argument. It is the motivation that concerns Rousseau, and, while we have little or no control over how well we think, we have substantial control over what we think about. We are not culpable for reasoning badly, but we are culpable for reasoning maliciously.

In addition, the Abbé invokes only simple, certain maxims and eschews sophistication.⁴⁸ He reasons from established facts and communicates them as straightforwardly and simply as he can. Finally, the Abbé epitomizes reasoning in the silence of the passions. In this respect, Rousseau writes, he "seemed a God among men." (*SP*, iii:659; xi:111) The Abbé's capacity to remain disinterested is beyond most of us, for whom the passions will always have some influence on conscious activity. However, the Abbé's composure points toward Rousseau's view of reason's regulative function. Wolmar's influence on Julie provides what is perhaps a more accessible example. Wolmar introduces this kind of composed, regulative faculty into Julie's life, "having restored me to myself," as she puts it. (*NH*, ii:365; vi:300). By restoring her love of order, Wolmar delivered Julie from a "fearful servitude," in the form of her unquenchable but doomed love for St. Preux.

Wolmar taught Julie to impose reason on her passions while always being guided by her best sentiments. A Rousseauian ethics of reason requires subjects to reason both with and against inclination. This ethic will both guide and be guided by sentiment. Reason alone cannot lead one to truth, though it can be a useful instrument for organizing, ordering, and channeling the sentiments that are the source of wisdom. Rousseau was after a kind of Socratic wisdom that focuses on the limitations of knowledge and on distinguishing between what is truly important and what is just for show. The

truly reasonable person will eschew discursive or philosophical reason—what Rousseau referred to as the “method of generalizing and abstracting” in a letter to Deschamps—in favor of a more modest, circumscribed approach. Instead of repressing sentiment in favor of reason, this person will engage in a back and forth between reason and sentiment, always using one as a regulative check on the other.

There is a similarity here to the process philosophers refer to as “reflective equilibrium,” inasmuch as it requires a working back and forth in pursuit of coherence. Philosophers have generally invoked the concept of reflective equilibrium to describe the process by which particular incidents or cases can be reconciled with the principles or rules that subjects intend to apply to them. For Rousseau, there is an analogous back and forth that occurs between sentiment and reason, whereby sentiments are confirmed by reason and vice versa. In the *Reveries*, Rousseau describes his “great principles” as having been “adopted by my reason, confirmed by my heart, and which all carry the seal of inner assent.” (R, i:1018; viii:23) Elsewhere, Rousseau refers to beliefs that emerge from sentiment and are confirmed by reason.⁴⁹ So, it is clear that there is a back and forth between reason and sentiment that occurs in Rousseau’s ethics of reason. It is precisely this dynamic of bi-directionality that proponents of reflective equilibrium are hoping to capture.⁵⁰

Michael Frazer helpfully invokes the language of sovereign and subject in describing the relationship between reason and sentiment in the work of the rationalist and sentimental philosopher of the Enlightenment. Whereas the rationalists distinguished between sovereign and subject components of the mind, sentimentalists did not make such a distinction, opting instead for what Frazer calls an “egalitarian” view of the mind rather than a “hierarchical” view.⁵¹ Though Frazer finds it difficult to categorize Rousseau as either a sentimental or a rationalist, in this regard at least, Rousseau is closer to those thinkers Frazer refers to as sentimentalists (principally David Hume and Adam Smith). He embraces a give and take between sentiment and reason in which both faculties play important roles. Sentiment is and ought to be the origin of our ideas, but reason plays the important regulative role of selecting those sentiments that will best serve us. The judgments of reason must then themselves be subject to a final confirmation by the sentiment, which is usually referred to by Rousseau as “conscience” or “the heart.”

For proponents of reflective equilibrium, the process of moving back and forth concludes when the subject is sufficiently satisfied that she has arrived at coherence between the two component judgments.⁵² Rousseau’s ethics of reason requires that the subject pursue an equilibrium between the intuitions of conscience or sentiment and the judgments of reason. Each faculty must verify the goodness of the other until the subject is satisfied that there is a coherence between the dictates of the two. In this way, the truthseeker avoids both the errors that flow from what we have called an excess of reason as well as those that flow from a deficiency of it.

Rousseau's critique of reason begins where reason itself becomes unreasonable, which is to say, where reason becomes sophisticated, or, more precisely, mediated. Reason becomes unreasonable when it becomes rationalism, when it is divorced from the sentiments that ensure its integrity. This can be read as an attack on reason or, as Kant read Rousseau, as a vindication of it.⁵³

Although Rousseau was largely skeptical of reason as he saw it practiced in intellectual circles, he understood that reason played an essential role in moral development. There could be no question of doing without it, even if we once were content to be guided by instinct alone. Our only alternative now is to gain control of reason, to circumscribe it properly and tie it closely to sentiment and experience, so as to ensure that it directs us to the truths essential to human happiness. As we have seen over the course of this book, the best way to ensure that this occurs is to follow an ethics of truthseeking that favors feeling over reason, the heart over the mind, the simple over the sophisticated, the useful over the demonstrable, and the personal over the systematic.

Notes

- 1 Allan Bloom and others working from within a Straussian perspective are interested in locating Rousseau's work along the axes of reason and religion or the few and the many. See Bloom's introduction (especially p. xix) to his translation of the *Letter to d'Alembert. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Politics and the Arts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1960). Bloom's suggestion is that Rousseau endorsed faith and patriotism as inferior paths to truth, appropriate only for those unable to make use of reason. The truths apprehended through reason are imagined, on this account, to be in some way higher. This reading requires an elaborate elevation of certain passages in Rousseau and a marginalizing of others such that the texts are implausibly reframed. I take Rousseau to be sincere in his praise for simple people and in his endorsement of faith and patriotism as good, unmediated pathways to the truths essential to human happiness. The uncultivated types disparaged by Bloom were, for Rousseau, to be admired for their immediate grasp of the same basic truths that those imagining themselves to be refined pursue through more complicated chains of reasoning. On Bloom's reading, reason leads us to truths unavailable through faith or republicanism. There is an element of truth to this but not, as Rousseau saw it, with respect to the truths essential to human happiness. Rousseau's primary claim with respect to reason was that it has alienated the vast majority of us from the sublime science of simple souls.
- 2 Michael Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford University Press, 2010) 9. Frazer's important argument distinguishes between what he describes as the "rationalist Enlightenment" and the "sentimentalist Enlightenment." (4) He has a difficult time categorizing Rousseau because Rousseau is one of several thinkers who, in Frazer's words, "evade such simple categorization." (4)
- 3 *Letter by Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva About a New Refutation of His Discourse by a Member of the Academy of Dijon*, iii:99; ii:176. This is an embrace of reason, to be sure, but it remains a far cry from Ernst Cassirer's (*The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*) or Timothy O'Hagan's (*Rousseau*) rationalist

interpretations of Rousseau. Cassirer argues that Rousseau eliminated feeling from the foundation of ethics, an interpretation he opposes to Karl Rosenkranz's claim that Rousseau's is nothing but a "vague morality of the good heart." (95) As we will see in this chapter, the debate Cassirer lays out between himself and Rosenkranz (95–101) is overdrawn. Rousseau's endorsement of reason presupposes a reason that is yoked to sentiment.

- 4 "The common authority is that of reason. I recognize no other." (CC, to the Gens de Loi, 15 October 1758, 712, v:178)
- 5 Rousseau was not entirely consistent with respect to his use of "passion," and "sentiment," which he sometimes gives a negative charge, sometimes a positive one, and sometimes neither. I have, therefore, used "non-rational" as a neutral umbrella term to capture both without implying that there is anything else that equates them. Following Rousseau, I have generally used "sentiment" to represent the non-rational components of consciousness that Rousseau valued and "passion" to represent that which he regarded as harmful, though, it has sometimes proved necessary to use "passion" to refer generally to the non-rational components of consciousness.
- 6 Starobinski invokes the terms "discursive" and "intuitive" reason to capture Rousseau's ambivalence. *Transparency and Obstruction*, 41.
- 7 Reason cannot provide the material for its own activity. When it becomes detached from the vital sentiments that ensure its integrity, it produces what Julie describes as "the vain sophisms of a reason which relies only on itself." (NH, ii:359; vi:295)
- 8 In the *Preface to Narcissus*, Rousseau goes so far as to invoke sentiment as a surrogate for reason. "It is mankind's fate that reason shows us the goal, and the passions divert us from it. Hence, even if it were true that I do not act according to my principles, this, by itself, would not be reason enough to accuse me of speaking in contradiction with my sentiment, or to accuse my principles of being false." (ii:962; ii:188)
- 9 Rousseau uses reason in the same way in the *Dialogues*: "When I published my first writings, the public was still left on its own, it hadn't yet completely adopted a sect and could hear the voice of truth and reason. But completely subjugated today, it no longer thinks, no longer reasons." (D, i:841; i:140)
- 10 Derathé, *Le rationalisme de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 37.
- 11 Derathé, *Le rationalisme de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 37.
- 12 This is also the sense in which Rousseau associates reason with universal justice in the *Social Contract* in the passage quoted at the beginning of this section.
- 13 It is in *Julie* and *Emile* (excluding the *Profession*) that Rousseau emphasizes the role reason plays in the development of moral agency. Here, Rousseau's emphasis on the sentimental foundations of reason recedes somewhat, though, as Timothy O'Hagan notes, it never disappears. In "La Morale sensitive de Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 125 (1993) 343–57, O'Hagan charts what he calls the *morale sensitive* across the spectrum of Rousseau's *corpus*, noticing that it is more present in the late and early work than it is in the middle. Rousseau never wavers from the *morale sensitive* as the ideal for the fully developed human being, but we do see reason invoked in more austere terms in Rousseau's writings on moral development.
- 14 Without reason, we cannot know good and bad (E, iv:288; xiii:196), which is to say not that we are immoral but rather that we are pre-moral. We do by inclination what we will only later be able to describe as right or wrong. Our actions have no moral status. However, while reason is coeval with morality, and necessary for it, reason is not the source of morality; reason is a tool moral agents need in order to make determinations that originate in the heart or

sentiment. “Conscience” is the name Rousseau gives to the faculty that “makes us love [good] and hate [bad].” (*E*, iv:288; xiii:196) Rousseau explicitly connects morality to nature in the *Letter to Beaumont*: “The fundamental principle of all morality . . . is that man is being that is naturally good and loves justice and order, that there is no original perversity in the human heart that that the first movements of nature are always right.” (iv:935–6; ix:28)

- 15 “It is not philosophers who know men best. They see them only through the prejudices of philosophy, and I know of no station where one has so many. A savage has a healthier judgment of us than a philosopher does.” (*E*, iv:535; xiii:399)
- 16 It goes without saying that Emile will not be raised to philosophize: “Remember that he is neither a scholar nor a philosopher, but a simple man, a friend of the truth, without party, without system.” (*E*, iv:348; xiii:246) Philosophy is associated with complexity, partisanship, systematicity, society, prejudice, and bustle and, Rousseau goes so far as to suggest, is *opposed* to reason: “after having philosophized your whole life, will you never learn to reason?” (*E*, iv:787; xiii:607–8)
- 17 Reason is not an independent faculty, operating in isolation from the others; it is rather a guide to our other faculties. As Rousseau puts it in *Emile*, reason is “a composite of all the other faculties.” (iv:317; xiii:214)
- 18 Rousseau’s claim about the relationship between reason and sentiment is both normative and descriptive. That is, his claim is twofold: (1) Reasoners ought to be guided by sentiment; and (2) In spite of our best efforts to the contrary, it is sentiment that inevitably drives reason. With respect to the descriptive dimension of Rousseau’s argument, the trajectory of current research in cognitive science confirms his position. Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, for example, have shown that subjects use reason to not to derive their own convections and beliefs but rather to persuade others to adopt these convictions and beliefs. Reason is used not for purposes of truthseeking, according to Mercier and Sperber, but rather to persuade others of truths that one has oneself already adopted as valid or useful. “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34 (2011) 57–111. Of particular interest in the context of Rousseau’s critique of reason is Mercier and Sperber’s emphasis on the prevalence of erroneous reasoning. If reason is used primarily to persuade, they argue, it should not be surprising that reasoners favor arguments that are easiest to justify over those that are better. This prejudice, which, for Rousseau, was inherent in the assertive, discursive forms of reason he criticized, helps to explain Rousseau’s preference for conscience or the *sentiment intérieur* over conceptual or abstract reason.
- 19 In the “Final Reply” to his first *Discourse*, Rousseau called philosophy a “vain semblance constructed by human pride.” (iii:73; ii:111)
- 20 Rousseau’s references to “philosophy” were usually historically specific, applicable to the self-styled philosophers Rousseau was living among at the time, who were, for him, so far from the genuine philosophers of antiquity as to be unworthy of the name.
- 21 Rousseau’s vision for the “true function of the philosopher” is also strikingly Platonic: “It is also at this age that the skillful master begins to take on the true function of the observer and philosopher who knows the art of sounding hearts while working to form them.” (*E*, iv:511; xiii:379) However, whereas citizens in Plato’s republic would be lost without philosophers, Rousseau asserts that “if all the kings and all the philosophers were taken away, their absence would hardly be noticeable.” (*E*, iv:510; xiii:378) Philosophy was for Plato the only path to enlightenment. For Rousseau, we are born enlightened and most philosophy serves to mystify. Rather than teach Emile to admire philosophers, Rousseau

recommends that he be educated “in such a way that he puts himself in no class but finds his bearings in all. Speak before him of humankind with tenderness, even with pity, but never with contempt. Man, do not dishonor man!” (*E*, iv:510; xiii:378)

- 22 Just as there is a genuine philosophy that serves truth, so too can poetry serve truth, as long as it is motivated by a love of justice, morality and the common good rather than personal ambition or the desire for attention.
- 23 “If the Sciences purified morals, if they taught men to shed their blood for their Fatherland, if they aroused courage; the Peoples of China would be wise, free, and invincible. But if there is no vice that does not dominate them; . . . if neither the enlightenment of Government officials, nor the supposed wisdom of Laws, nor the multitude of Inhabitants of that vast Empire have been able to save it from the yoke of the ignorant and coarse Tartar, what purpose did all its Learned men serve?” (*DAS*, iii:11; ii:8)
- 24 “One cannot conclude, therefore, from my principles that a man cannot be learned and virtuous all at once.” (*O*, iii:39; ii:40)
- 25 Rousseau praises the “true philosopher” (along with the “first philosophers”) in the *Preface to Narcissus*. (ii:191; ii:967)
- 26 In a letter describing Wolmar, Rousseau has Julie write: “I find him quite superior to all us people of sentiment who admire ourselves so; for the heart deceives us in a thousand ways and acts only on a principle that is always suspect; but reason has no end except that which is good; its rules are sure, clear, easy in the conduct of life, and never does it go astray except in futile speculations that are not right for it.” (*NH*, ii:370; vi:305)
- 27 This suggests a tripartite model of the soul, consisting not of reason, spirit, and appetite, as Plato’s did, but rather of reason, sentiment, and the passions. This model can be found throughout Rousseau’s work but is perhaps clearest in *Julie*. Functioning optimally, reason and sentiment combine to control the passions. Unlike Plato’s tripartite model, in which reason dominates, for Rousseau, sentiment should be the origin and inspiration for our actions, while reason, optimally, plays the critical but secondary role of managing sentiment.
- 28 Truth was, for Rousseau, personal. In one of the *Letters to Malesherbes*, Rousseau describes the process by which he realized that he would have to consult himself only. What was most himself, he decided, was his senses, and so he resolved to place his senses above all other considerations. Rousseau describes this as a very difficult choice, because it required him to “hold out ceaselessly against the current.” (i:1136; v:576)
- 29 Virtue for Rousseau is less the suppression of the non-rational by the rational than the suppression of corrupting passions by the proper combination of reason and sentiment.
- 30 Of course, our love must be the right kind, and how we determine that is difficult to say. In *Julie*, Rousseau suggests that love is pure, when it is love of virtue. This is why it has been said that love is no longer possible for Rousseau once it has been consummated. Virtue, for Rousseau, is always self-sacrifice, and once the relationship has been consummated, the occasion for virtue has passed. Love is possible only right up until the moment of consummation, at which point it becomes difficult to know whether it remains morally pure or compromised by passion.
- 31 See Laurence Cooper, “Nearer My True Self to Thee: Rousseau’s New Spirituality—and Ours,” *The Review of Politics* 74 (2012) 471–2.
- 32 The *Profession* was composed, Rousseau wrote in the *Letter to Beaumont*, to “combat modern materialism.” (*LB*, iv:996; ix:75) The text, however, is equally a refutation of rationalism. David Lay Williams provides the historical context

- for Rousseau's critique of materialism in chapter two of *Rousseau's Platonic Enlightenment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).
- 33 The vicar's principles are not principles at all but "articles of faith." (*E*, iv:576; xiii:434)
 - 34 In the *Letter to d'Alembert* "practical truth" is opposed to "vain philosophical chatter," which Rousseau associates with "the few" as opposed to "the public." (*LDA*, v:6; x:255)
 - 35 Much of modern corruption can be understood as the erosion of public responsibility. Whereas ancient citizens, philosophers, and statesmen felt compelled to justify their public remarks, modern men and women speak without regard for the effect they may have on public morality. To *prend la parole* had become a pastime, sometimes a competition, frequently a path to personal success. It had become something most people took lightly. Rousseau hoped to restore the burden of responsibility upon those who would take up *la parole*.
 - 36 "... my rule of yielding to sentiment more than to reason is confirmed by reason itself." (*E*, iv:573; xiii:432)
 - 37 "Among so many inhuman and bizarre cults, among this prodigious diversity of morals and characters, you will find everywhere the same ideas of justice and decency, everywhere the same notions of good and bad." (*E*, iv:597–8; xiii:451)
 - 38 In Rousseau's reading of Molière's *The Misanthrope*, he characterizes Philinte as a "philosopher," by which Rousseau means he is characterized by a "reasoning apathy." (*LDA*, v:36; x:279) Rousseau finds himself sympathizing with the "Misanthrope," Alceste, who, Rousseau writes, is not really a misanthrope after all, because his hatred is reserved for "knaves" and "flatterers;" if not for them, Rousseau continued, Alceste would "love all humankind." (*LDA*, v:35; x:278) Alceste is not without fault, but he is to be preferred to the "philosopher Philinte" because of his strong sensibility. (*LDA*, v:38; x:281)
 - 39 See chapter three of *Men and Citizens*.
 - 40 In the *Letters Written from the Mountain*, Rousseau wrote that the *Profession* and the concluding letters of *Julie* "are sufficiently in accord that one can explain one of them by the other." (iii:694; ix:139)
 - 41 This raises the question as to whether Rousseau is writing for Sophie alone or whether his arguments are relevant for everyone. Is Rousseau, like Socrates, giving his interlocutor her due?: "... I offer you an homage that is due to you." (*ML*, iv:1082; xii:175)
 - 42 Conscience was, for Rousseau, not a rational faculty but rather a "divine instinct." It is the path through which God speaks in us; without conscience, there would be nothing to distinguish human beings from animals, except, of course, for reason, which lowers us below even the beasts by leading us to a series of increasingly dangerous errors as we stray further and further from nature's voice. (*ML*, iv:1111; xii:197) Conscience is the name Rousseau gives to the love of virtue. It might be thought of as the *sentiment pur de la moralité*, an extension of the *sentiment pur de l'existence*. Conscience is the social realization of the savage's love of existence.
 - 43 "The sad truth that time and reason have unveiled to me by making me sense my misfortune has made me see that there is no remedy for it and all that was left was for me to resign myself to it." (*R*, i:1011–2; viii:17)
 - 44 See *E*, iv:594; xiii:448.
 - 45 *NH*, ii:493; vi:405; *D*, i:879; i:170. To Franquières, Rousseau wrote, "Take away the *sentiment intérieur* and I defy all the modern philosophers together to prove to Berkeley that the body exists." (CC, 15 January 1769, 6529, xxxvii:17) Reason remains authoritative for Rousseau: "The common authority is that of reason. I do not recognize any other." (CC, to Gens de Loi, 15 October 1758, 712, v:178) But reason functions always in conjunction with sentiment,

and functions reliably only in conjunction with the *sentiment intérieur*. Robert Derathé, in a text on what he calls “Rousseau’s rationalism,” makes clear that Rousseau’s conception of reason is not at odds with his emphasis on sentiment: “One can . . . , according to Rousseau, appeal to the inner sentiment without ceasing to have a rational posture.” *Rationalisme de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, 66.

- 46 In a letter to Jacob Vernes sent in 1758, Rousseau raised the possibility that sentiment alone might be sufficient: “I have abandoned reason and consulted nature, that is, the inner sentiment that directs my conscience independent of my reason.” (CC, 18 February 1758, 616, v:32–3) But even if Rousseau usually described human beings as directed primarily by sentiment, he also usually assigned reason an important regulative function: “The error of the majority of moralists was always to take man as an essentially reasoning being. Man is nothing but a sensing being who consults uniquely his passions in order to act.” But the passions do not always issue clear, ethical, or just orders, and so, Rousseau continued, reason must be deployed to “overcome the nonsense they make [men] do.” (*Fragment on Morals*, OC, iii:554)
- 47 Rhetoric has a place in Rousseau’s political theory, in that it must be deployed to warm citizens’ hearts to virtue. However, rhetoric, like reason, must be deployed very cautiously, exclusively in cases where necessity requires it.
- 48 “I will leave behind everything that is merely erudite in order to limit myself to my subject.” (*History of the Government of Geneva*, iii:500; ix:104)
- 49 See note 46.
- 50 The concept of reflective equilibrium helps to clarify an oft-noticed difficulty in Rousseau’s discussion of conscience. As we have seen, Rousseau describes conscience as a sentiment. However, he is equally clear that conscience must be guided by reason in order for it to be effective. See Hanley, “Rousseau’s Virtue Epistemology,” 255–7.
- 51 Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy*, 6.
- 52 See T. M. Scanlon’s “Rawls on Justification” for a nuanced explanation and evaluation of reflective equilibrium, in Samuel Freeman ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 139–67.
- 53 In the *Dialogues*, the “Frenchman” credits “Rousseau” with “bringing him back to reason” by persuading him of the quality of Jean-Jacques’ character. (D, i:940; i:217)

Conclusion

“Everyone on earth has a purpose. Mine is to tell the public difficult but useful truths.”

(CC, to Jean Ribotte, 24 October 1761, 1521, ix:201)

This book was born from the notion that there is much to be gained from following Rousseau down the various pathways to truth traced in his writings. My reading has therefore been a generous one. I have been more interested in describing the nature of Rousseau’s pathways to truth than in assessing their relative success. My ambition has been to distill Rousseau’s most essential principles and to describe how those principles fit together into a coherent philosophical system. There are many ways in which that system might be criticized, both from the outside and from within, but my purpose in this book has been to engage in exegesis more than critique. I have used the lens of truth—that to which he claimed to have dedicated his life—to substantiate Rousseau’s claim to have presented a coherent system. In so doing, I have tried not only to outline Rousseau’s philosophy of truth but to show how reading Rousseau through the lens of truth compels a reframing of many of the classic problems in Rousseau studies, which emerge primarily from Rousseau’s seemingly impossible commitment to both voluntarism and virtue.

In these concluding pages, I want to suggest how the philosophy of truth presented here might be understood within the context of existing approaches to truth and how it might contribute to ongoing philosophical work on truth and truthseeking.

I would emphasize first that Rousseau’s defense of ignorance—what he called “a reasonable kind of ignorance”—should not be taken for a defense of the know-nothingism that has been a bane on American society and in similarly benighted movements around the world.¹ Rousseau’s reasonable ignorance was not a justification for avoiding the truth; it was rather a technique for safeguarding it. His skepticism toward the arts and sciences, toward philosophy and all forms of systematic or sophisticated reasoning, had little or nothing to do with those things themselves but was rather part

of a larger argument about the influence of inflamed *amour propre* and institutionalized inequality in modern societies.

For this reason, Rousseau distinguished between the reasonable ignorance he was interested in defending and “a ferocious and brutal ignorance which is born of a wicked heart and a false mind.” (O, iii:54; ii51–2) This latter was an ignorance born of a willful denial or evasion of the truth for purposes of personal or political gain. It was motivated not by a love of the truth but by a fear or hatred of it. In our current political climate, in which it is common to hear American politicians refusing to take a position on pressing issues of the day because, as they put it, “I’m not a scientist,” today’s reader may be justifiably concerned about an argument that has anything positive to say about ignorance. But, it is important to distinguish between Rousseau’s critique of science and the hostility to it we see today. Whereas Rousseau saw nothing wrong with science itself but only the agendas to which it had been conscripted, today’s anti-science movement does just the opposite. It is science itself that its adherents oppose. As Gary Wills has put it, “They summon a courage not to know”—the opposite of Kant’s *sapere aude* (dare to know) which was itself inspired by Rousseau’s *vitam impendere vero* (dedicate life to truth).²

Olivier Roy refers to the willful denial of substantiated truth claims as “holy ignorance,” which invokes the authority of a deeper truth that is being protected from the threat posed by scientific inquiry.³ This initially sounds quite close to the reasonable ignorance that Rousseau preferred to most of what masqueraded under the banner of the arts and sciences. Rousseau would no doubt be horrified at the comparison. The holy ignorance identified by Roy and Wills is grounded in a kind of religious dogmatism that Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking stood squarely against. Indeed, Rousseau believed that religious dogmatism posed an equal or greater threat to the sublime science of simple souls, as did the skeptical dogmatism of secular intellectuals. But there is another kind of ignorance that Rousseau wanted to redeem. It is a humble ignorance, defined more by preservation and protection than by assertion, an ignorance that is content with the basic truths it knows to be useful for human happiness and does not aggressively seek out new ones. It is an ignorance that is not enamored of curiosity; it is suspicious of sophisticated arguments purporting to disprove simple, useful truths, but it does not fear the results of any sincere inquiry.

Dwight Eisenhower once described an intellectual as “a man who uses more words than are necessary to tell more than he knows.”⁴ This is much closer to the spirit of Rousseau. Rousseau admired simplicity to be sure, but simplicity is not stupidity. The opposite of simplicity is not knowledge or learning but rather sophistication. Too often sophistication is confused with learning, and it was this realization that started Rousseau on the path that produced the seminal philosophy of truth I have presented in this book. There is much that we cannot know, and Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking counsels us to be wary of the lures and traps associated with curiosity about

those things. But his love of truth was even more about safeguarding and securing the truths that were already in our possession, of holding tightly to those truths when tempted by the novel or the new. We must especially make sure that we do not allow “party men” to tempt us away from what we know to be true. For Rousseau, this meant cleaving to love of God and one’s compatriots, as religion and patriotism were the primary targets of the skeptical philosophers who were ascendant in eighteenth-century Europe. It meant resisting the dogmatism of the *religion des prêtres* and the temptations of inflamed *amour propre*. For us, by contrast, it might mean defending validated scientific theories and verified facts against the tendentious assertions of vested interests. It might mean resisting pressure to a false objectivity that would give “equal time” to evolutionary biologists and Creationists, to climate deniers and climate scientists, to immunologists and anti-vaxxers, to Islamic scholars and Islamophobes, to voices of tolerance and voices of exclusion.

I use the conditional “might,” because Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking is not meant as a framework for resolving hard cases. By itself, it will not tell us, for example, whether God bestows grace through a general will or through particular wills; neither will it tell us the circumstances under which it is permissible to wage war, nor when and if capital punishment is morally justified, although Rousseau had views on all of these questions. What Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking does is to position us to make choices with respect to these and other questions from a disposition that serves human happiness, by which Rousseau meant choices that facilitate communion, whether with nature, God, a friend, a lover, or with compatriots. We will be best situated to accomplish this when we privilege the useful over the demonstrable, the personal over the systematic, the immediate over the mediated, and the simple over the sophisticated. This was Rousseau’s ethics of the self, to borrow from Foucault. It was his version of a life dedicated to truth, inspired by Socrates to be sure, but equally by Fénelon, Cato, and millions of ordinary citizens and faithful, all of whom embodied valid ways—social and solitary, private and public—of dedicating life to truth.

How might this approach to truth inform ongoing work on truth and truthseeking? I would suggest three areas of inquiry that would benefit from sustained engagement with Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking. First, as discussed at the end of chapter four, political theorists, philosophers, and psychologists have become increasingly interested in the role that emotion and sentiment play in political reasoning and decision-making.⁵ Those working in this area would do well to consult both Rousseau’s critique of reason and his attempt to reconstitute it as a regulative faculty, subordinate to faith, sentiment, and personal experience. George Marcus, for example, effectively traces a consensus—stretching from Joseph Schumpeter and Walter Lippmann to contemporary theories of deliberative democracy—that presupposes that democracies ought to have as an objective the rationalization of political deliberation.⁶ If Rousseau is right, this ambition is both

impossible and undesirable. Emotion will unavoidably play a role in political decision-making because, as Rousseau put it in the *Dialogues*, “my reason chooses the feeling the heart prefers.” (*D*, i:879; i:170) But, more importantly, as Marcus and many others are beginning to show, good judgment does not result from the suppression of emotion and the dominance of reason but, rather, from the proper combination of the two. As Marcus puts it, “people are able to be rational because they are emotional; emotions enable rationality.”⁷ If this is the case, then the effort to exclude emotion from deliberation will undermine reason and distort judgment. At any rate, for those interested in pursuing this argument, Rousseau’s writings on truth and truthseeking, in particular the relationship between reason and sentiment, will be especially useful.

A second avenue of research suggested by the argument presented here is in the field of virtue epistemology.⁸ Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking tells us less about truth itself than it does about the dispositions that are most likely to lead us to truth. His ethics of truthseeking is an account of the type of person that is most likely to find the truth, of what it would mean in practice to lead a life consecrated to the truth. He had little interest in the questions that preoccupy contemporary philosophies of truth: What is truth?, or What makes a statement true?. His concern was for the qualities of the truthseeker—what virtue epistemologists refer to as “epistemic virtues.” Rousseau was less interested in the principles we adopt than in the pathway we take to those principles. He was confident that, having followed the proper path, every person would arrive at the same basic truths of human happiness. Rousseau’s ethics of truthseeking is an attempt to describe what must be done to access the truth, whatever its substantive content. Rousseau’s question was not “What is truth?” but, rather, “What are the qualities of the truthseeker?”

As noted in the introduction, Rousseau’s emphasis on the subject of truth rather than on the nature of truth itself has affinities with virtue epistemology, which emphasizes the qualities of the excellent thinker, rather than the qualities of truth itself. For virtue epistemologists, the criterion for truth (or justified belief) is whether the subject was properly motivated or epistemically responsible in arriving at a judgment about the truth, that is, whether she acted in accordance with the virtues requisite to truthseeking. This resonates quite well with Rousseau’s approach to truth.

That being said, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the comparison to virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemologists conceptualize epistemic virtue as cognitive or intellectual and define effective truthseekers as good cognizers. The epistemic virtues are faculties such as perception, intuition, and memory, as well as character traits such as conscientiousness and open-mindedness. While Rousseau’s truthseeker will no doubt develop those faculties and possess those character traits, his ethics of truthseeking encompasses not only what virtue epistemologists refer to as epistemic virtues but also an ethics of the self that is closer the accounts of truthseeking

and truthseekers presented by the subjective approach to truth that runs through Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Foucault. Rousseau's ethics of truth involves much more than cognition. In addition, while virtue epistemology posits an ethics of truthseeking, it does not treat truth itself as an ethical problem. Rousseau's philosophy of truth was ethical in a double sense: He not only described the epistemic virtues of the truthseeker; he also evaluated truth claims themselves in ethical terms. He was quite happy, in other words, to measure truth claims by their utility. For these reasons, while Rousseau has much to contribute to virtue epistemology, his approach to truth is closer to a Foucauldian or Kierkegaardian ethics of truth.

This brings us to the third application of the argument presented in this book, which is to the subjective theories of truth that I have associated with Søren Kierkegaard and Michel Foucault. While this is not the place to engage, compare, or parse these arguments in detail, it is enough to note that this approach focuses on the subject's relationship to truth, rather than on the nature of truth itself. There is a common assumption in the philosophy of truth that before we can know anything, we must know what it would mean to know something. That is, we must first ascertain the reliability of the instrument we are using to study whatever it is we are studying. Epistemology must precede ontology. But the instrument we use to study the world is the same instrument (the only instrument) we have. This presents a dilemma: The same instrument is both subject and object of its own study. This dilemma cannot be transcended, which is good news for professional philosophers. There will always be another formulation of this problem and another way of coming at it, with the only certainty being that it will never (because it can never) be overcome. As Kierkegaard argued in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, subjective inquirers are not unaware of this kind of paradox. They are all too aware of it, in fact, and this is precisely what impels them to focus on the subjective aspect of truth—truth as an ethical, ontological, or aesthetic problem rather than an epistemological one.

Kierkegaard distinguishes between the “objective path” to truth and the “subjective path.” The former approaches truth as something external, to be understood at a distance, while the latter approaches it as a lived experience, as an ontological problem rather than an epistemological one. Much as Rousseau was interested in, and interested only in, truths that pertain to human happiness, so too was Kierkegaard interested only in truths that pertained to what he called “existence:”

All essential knowing concerns existence, or only such knowing as has an essential relation to existence is essential, is essential knowing. Knowing that does not concern existence, inwardly in the reflection if inwardness, is from an essential point of view accidental knowing, its degree and scope from an essential point of view indifferent.⁹

Kierkegaard here disparages inquiries that are purely intellectual, that do not bear on existence, which he associated with a “joy in life” but also with a richness that encompasses struggle and suffering, as well as enjoyment.¹⁰ Like Rousseau, he attacked the “speculative philosopher” who is too detached to be invested in his “eternal happiness.”¹¹ The speculator prides himself on being objective, which is to say he prides himself preserving a certain detached relationship to the object of his inquiry. He is focused on the phenomenon he is describing rather than on the relevance of that inquiry for him. He distinguishes sharply between what he is studying and how he is studying it. But, in Kierkegaard’s terms, “The ‘how’ of truth is precisely truth.”¹²

It is their focus on the *how* rather than the *what* of truth that unites Kierkegaard and Rousseau. Kierkegaard uses the example of a person at prayer to illustrate the distinction between the two paths to truth. We can imagine two individuals immersed in prayer, one who is praying to the “true conception of God” but with a “false spirit,” the other praying to a pagan idol but with what Kierkegaard calls a “passion for the infinite.” In the Jewish tradition, there is the popular story of a young shepherd who had no familiarity with Jewish practice or doctrine but wanted nevertheless to participate in prayer. On Yom Kippur, he arrived at the synagogue with the flute he was accustomed to playing as he tended his flock. As the congregation entered collectively into ritualistic prayer, he found himself at a loss as to how he might join them. Unaware that the tradition bans the playing of musical instruments on Yom Kippur, he takes out his flute and begins to play inspired by what might be described as Kierkegaard’s “passion for the infinite.” While the congregants initially turn to chastise the boy for his desecration of the holiday, the rabbi quickly instructs them that the devotion of the boy’s prayer has elevated the collective intention (*kavanah* in Hebrew) of the community’s prayers. Similarly, for Rousseau, it was the intention with which one prays that mattered most; it was the disposition toward the divine that determined how close one would come to the truth. He cared little for the “form of the priest’s costume,” as he put it, himself having migrated from Protestantism to Catholicism and back again. What did matter to Rousseau was to pray together “as brothers.”

Truth, according to the subjective tradition, cannot be grasped solely as an object that one either possesses or does not possess. It is a state of the soul (or subject), within which one is disposed favorably toward the truth. In a late lecture, Michel Foucault captured the relationship between truth and being that he associated with Socrates and that we have seen at work in Rousseau.

More precisely, what I would like to recover is how truth-telling, in this ethical modality which appeared with Socrates right at the start of Western philosophy, interacted with the principle of existence as an oeuvre to be fashioned in all its possible perfection, how the care of self,

which in the Greek tradition long before Socrates, was governed by the principle of a brilliant and memorable existence, [...] was not replaced but taken up, inflected, modified, and re-elaborated by the principle of truth-telling that has to be confronted courageously, how the objective of a beautiful existence and the task of giving an account of oneself in the game of truth were combined. What I wanted to try to recover was something of the relation between the art of existence and true discourse, between the beautiful existence and the true life, life in the truth, life for the truth.¹³

In order to do this, Foucault turned to the Greek notion of *parrhesia* (truth-telling), which emphasizes, the virtues and dispositions of the subject who speaks the truth rather than the nature of the truths spoken. The *parrhesiastes* is identified not by what she knows but by her disposition to the truth. *Parrhesia* was conceptualized as a duty, very like the commitment Rousseau vowed to fulfill when he adopted *vitam impendere vero* as his motto. This duty implies much more than adherence to the proscription against lying. The *parrhesiastes* vows to tell the truth as he sees it, even in contexts in which that truth will be difficult to tell by dint of being uncomfortable to those hearing it. He vows not only to tell the truth but to tell all that he knows to be true, freely and voluntarily, and to shun the rhetorical ornamentation that obscures the truth. Foucault describes this as “telling the truth without hiding it behind anything.”¹⁴

Foucault associated *parrhesia* with Socrates in his late lectures on truth, collected under the title *The Courage of the Truth*. He admired Socrates’s emphasis on care of the self, which he opposed to the detached posture of the pre-Socratics. Rousseau likewise admired Socrates for his love of the truth, which Rousseau privileged over the possession of it. And Rousseau followed Socrates as well in his emphasis on living in accordance with an ethics of truth that Foucault described as care of the self. Here again, however, the comparison between Rousseau and Foucault should not be taken too far. Rousseau, for example, did not share Foucault’s view that truth was constituted by power, holding instead to a set of universal truths that abide regardless of human activity—the sovereignty of a benevolent God, the goodness of existence, universal justice, and so forth. Nor did Rousseau always tell the truth without holding anything back, as Victor Gourevitch has ably chronicled.¹⁵ Nevertheless, with regard to their shared view of truthseeking as an ethics of the self, there are affinities that warrant studying Rousseau within the context of the subjective approach to truth.

Finally, in closing, we might ask how viable Rousseau’s ethics of truth-seeking remains for us latter-day truthseekers. And to that question, I would suggest that it remains quite viable. Its components are rather ordinary—utility, autonomy, immediacy, and simplicity—and are intended as a sublime science of simple souls, more often found in humble men and women than in refined ones. They do not require sophistication or erudition. Neither are

they, for the most part, especially austere. Moreover, many of the threats they were intended to overcome should resonate for us rather profoundly—the dogmatism of religious clerics, infatuation with wealth, fame, and the institutions of inequality, and the banality of a disenchanted world.

We may worry that Rousseau's ideal—should we choose to pursue it—cannot be attained in a world that has become ever more mediated and complicated. Perhaps, however, for those consecrated to the task, some comfort can be found in knowing that the mediation that Rousseau observed in eighteenth-century Europe already seemed to him to be an insurmountable barrier. Our anxiety, in other words, has a long history. Moreover, it is probably symptomatic of the desire to transcend, to overcome the obstacles between us and the truths that pertain to human happiness. If we were definitively lost, we would have forgotten that we are lost. And to the extent we continue to suspect that we have gone wrong somehow, that we are in some way alienated from the truths essential to our own happiness, we have in Rousseau a fellow traveler, perhaps our greatest and almost certainly our most influential chronicler of alienation and the desire to overcome it. Indeed, this was precisely how Rousseau understood his purpose and justified his decision to add to Europe's already swollen bookshelves: "Everyone on earth has a purpose. Mine is to tell the public difficult but useful truths." By virtue of his proximity to nature and to original goodness, his innocent and simple character, Rousseau believed that he could see things that had become obscure to others, that he was uniquely positioned to communicate these useful truths. Over the two and a half centuries since Rousseau first articulated his system, readers have disagreed mightily over how useful these ostensible truths are, and those disagreements will certainly continue. But whether we agree with Rousseau or not, his influence will no doubt continue to inform our most fundamental debates about who we are and how we ought to live. The best way to understand why this is the case is to read Rousseau through the lens of truth, through his decision to dedicate his life to truth and through the ethics of truthseeking he developed to rescue us from the self-inflicted alienation that we imposed upon ourselves when we decided to build society on inflamed *amour propre* and institutionalized inequality.

Notes

- 1 For a history of this sentiment in America, see Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage, 1964). For a more recent survey of the phenomenon, see Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (New York: Vintage, 2008).
- 2 Gary Wills, "Holy Ignorance," blogpost, *New York Review of Books*, posted June 18, 2015.
- 3 Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- 4 Cited in Jacoby, *The Age of Unreason*, 286.

- 5 See, for example, Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen*; Hall, *The Trouble With Passion*; and Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, as well as Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*; Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); and Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 6 Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen*, ch. 1.
- 7 Marcus, *The Sentimental Citizen*, 7.
- 8 For the most part, Rousseau is not seen as a key figure (or even a marginal one) in virtue epistemology. In “Rousseau’s Virtue Epistemology,” Ryan Hanley first laments this fact and then reads Emile’s moral education through the lens of virtue epistemology.
- 9 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 166.
- 10 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 240–1.
- 11 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 49.
- 12 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 270.
- 13 Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 163.
- 14 Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 10.
- 15 Victor Gourevitch, “Rousseau and Lying,” *Berkshire Review* 15 (1994) 93–107.

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